II Lent 2023
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish
Father Craig Looney
St. Matthew 15.21-28

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Parents don't like seeing their children sick. They want to see them well...and as quickly as possible. We would not like it if the medical professional we went to for help acted like he had more important things to do than to help our child.

Both Matthew and Mark relate the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Mark gives us some interesting background why Jesus and his disciples were in Tyre and Sidon in the first place. They went there to get away from the crowds...to have a meal and get some rest. Even Jesus needed a day off from his busy ministry. The crowds found him anyway!

Enter our brave Canaanite mother...brave because she was taking a big risk just talking to Jesus. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the land God promised to Moses and his descendants. They were pagans and the Jews considered them unclean...people to be avoided.

Our mother wants her daughter healed. Perhaps she heard Jesus was passing by...perhaps this was her final act of desperation in turning to Jesus for help. Her love for her daughter took priority over everything else. It even cancelled out whatever fear she might have had for what people might think about her.

She begs Jesus to heal her daughter...who is possessed by a demon and in a terrible condition. We are not given any more details about the girl's condition. It is clear from the Gospel, Jesus heard the cries of our desperate mother. Why, then, does he ignore her? Why, doesn't he immediately heal the girl?

The disciples are so bothered by the noise she was making they ask Jesus to send her away. Jesus tells them his mission is to the "lost sheep"...the "people of Israel". It is as if Jesus is saying to his disciples not to waste their time helping someone who doesn't have the right pedigree.

While Jesus tells us his primary mission is to his own people...he later sends the Apostles out to "all nations"...bringing the Good News to the whole world.

Our desperate mother is persistent...she will not be ignored and she will not take no for an answer. She begs Jesus to help her...right now...without any further delay. How does Jesus respond? He says it isn't right to give the children's food to dogs. Ouch!

Jesus' response seems out of character and is hard for us to digest even today. But it does not send our desperate mother running away leaving her prayer for healing unanswered. She tells Jesus even dogs get to eat the leftovers that fall from the table. Her response to Jesus shows great humility given Jews and Gentiles didn't have much to do with each other. It also shows her great faith...she was willing to put her own feelings aside and come to Jesus for help.

Jesus was not being disrespectful of the mother...he had every intention of healing her daughter...and he did. He told her to go home and she would find her daughter well. What Jesus did was test the woman's faith...did she really believe in her heart he could help her?

We may not see Lent as the time when are tested...but it is. We learned last week...Saint Paul tells us we can expect to be tested. He also tells us God will give us the strength to remain firm in the faith...and give us a way out of the test. Faith...like hope and love...are actions. That's the point of today's Gospel.

Our Gentile mother had the kind of faith in Jesus that compelled her to take action. It's that kind of faith Jesus wants us to show...the kind of faith that compels us to bring our cares, worries and concerns to Jesus and the cross...knowing he can and will help us sort things out and restore order to our lives.

Jesus does not answer our prayers with silence. Part of what it means to have faith in Jesus is to follow the example of the mother in today's Gospel...be persistent in our prayers. There is no such thing as a prayer that goes unanswered. We will get one of three answers...yes, no, or wait a while.

Jesus offers us love, compassion, forgiveness, wholeness and healing. When we leave here today...we will not be leaving with leftovers!

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