

REMINISCERE (LENT 2)

Matthew 15:21-28

Even the dogs eat the crumbs...

“It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” Who of us would keep pursuing a Pastor who spoke to us like that? But she pursues Him all the more passionately, begs all the more pathetically, cries all the more piercingly. She knows who He is. She knows what He can do. She leaves her daughter home, sure that He who spoke life into existence could speak healing into her daughter's bones, into her soul, with but a word. She had listened to the first lesson today, and she would wrestle with God if wrestling with God was what it would take.

It's not uncommon for Christ to expect us to wrestle. He hides Himself. He lets us shout louder and louder in an attempt to be heard. He becomes a stranger of sorts, so unlike the gentle Shepherd set before us elsewhere. *“Bless me,”* we demand, even as our hip is put out of socket so that our Christian walk becomes more cumbersome. Faith is not given for sunshine and smiles. Faith is given to grapple with God, to sink its nails into Christ's flesh, to call Him an ever-present help in trouble precisely when He seems an ever-distant recluse unconcerned with our plight.

The prophet Hosea writes of Jacob, *“In the womb he took his brother by the heel, and in his manhood he strove with God. He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.”* As life and death met on the cross, humility and bold persistence meet in faith. Faith has muscles, not to flex in the mirror, but to employ in the ring. Faith that brings a list of demands or sets limits on what it receives, that retreats at the first cannon shot or surrenders in the first battle, that cowers at the first sign of danger or taps out after the first blow, is no faith at all. Faith is not a rabbit's tail to be tossed when good luck cuts and runs. Faith is a clenched fist, quick to hit its knees no matter what it's knee-deep in, yet insistent that nothing and no one will ever pin it on its back.

Jesus speaks the most dangerous words one can speak in our Holy Gospel, words the devil had surely already sown in the mind of this Canaanite woman as her pleas went unheard or, at the least, unheeded. *“I've been sent for others, and not you.”* He speaks the truth. He was sent to the Jews. But, testing her, He does not speak the whole truth. While His ministry was for Israel, His mercy was for all.

The gospel must always and in every way stomp out every despairing notion that would hint that Jesus' message, Jesus' mercy is for others but not for us. No, Jesus is Jesus for all, even for us, even when we have no reason but His promise to think so. Christian faith does not ask, “Who am I?” but “Who is He,” and so long as He is Christ, He is *our* Jesus, not their Jesus.

The disciples think they are compassionate, they want to put the woman out of her misery. They want the Lord to simply tell her, “No,” and send her away. It seems

cruel for Jesus to let her debase herself like this. But the cruelest thing someone can do to a desperate person is turn her away from Christ. While Jesus answers the woman, He teaches the disciples. He is heaven's bouncer, and He is bad at His job: He turns no one away.

"Fine, I am a dog," she replies. *"Give me what You'd give the dogs, so long as it's crumbs of the Bread of Life."* Like a father racing his son, who wants his son to catch him and overcome him. Jesus wanted this woman to do what the Pharisees could not: catch Him in His words; and, as she does He gladly speaks the words she longs to hear: *"O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."*

Our house, with six little hands for dropping tasty scraps, is crumb heaven; a quick glance at our pooch's pouch will prove that. But perhaps we have something to learn from the fattened quickness of dogs chasing crumbs. Their eyes get big, and they can beforehand taste what they do not deserve and yet receive. They don't see crumbs, but treasures—treasures they sometimes even stalk, following a toddler with a precariously held treat just waiting, just waiting for the crumb to hit the floor.

Why shouldn't our attitude be the same? Pounce on the crumbs. Taste them before you eat them. Never mind that you don't deserve them; receive them with the big eyes of a hungry soul. If the Jews would not have the bread, Jesus would give this Canaanite the crumbs, and not just the crumbs, but the whole loaf.

The same is true today. We have been given the whole loaf, but it will quickly pass on to those who gladly chase the crumbs if we don't appreciate it, if we look down on those who scrounge for that into which we've been born. There is no room for condescension in the Church. Condescension in the church is like one homeless man calling another a hobo for eating trash, even as he himself takes a bite out of someone else's half-eaten sandwich.

Christian is not what good people are. Christian is not pass the peas instead of reaching, set your glass on a coaster, never wear white before labor day, and don't laugh at your own jokes. Christian is not another way to say someone's a jolly good fellow. No, Christian is what real people are. Christian is reach for the scraps and eat off the floor. Christian is another way to say someone's a jolly hungry fellow.

Be dogs! Cast off all other thoughts and wishes and hopes and focus on these crumbs. Learn to pray more like a helpless child and less like a spoiled brat. Get on your knees, rub elbows with each other under the Savior's table, and let your mouth water for every morsel of mercy that falls. Better eternal crumbs from the Savior than perishable cake from the world, for a dog at Christ's table has a seat at the feast! Now come to the table, get your crumbs, shed on and from the cross, and leave forgiven and full. Amen.