**The Tenth Sunday after Pentecost**

**Matthew 15: 21-28  
August 16, 2020**

My first *“real job”* after graduating from college was to actually work for a college in their admissions office. And one of the *“perks”* of working there, besides free tuition, was the convenient location of the gymnasium, which could not have been more than a hundred feet from my office. What that meant was that during my lunch, I could run over there, get in a quick workout, shower, and be all set to go in an hour.

Well, I remember one time when they were remodeling the men’s locker room. They were just about done, except for those last few details like hanging the towel racks, the mirrors, and things like that. Now, the task of doing all that was given to one of the maintenance guys named Lucas. That was his name but everyone called him *“Stretch”* and I don’t think I need to explain too much why; the name speaks for itself. *“Stretch”* was probably something like 6 foot a hundred! To say he was tall would be to understate the facts. He literally had to duck to go through doorways.

Anyway, he was in the locker room just finishing hanging the mirrors as I was just finishing getting cleaned up. So, I went over to the mirror to comb my hair *(which I had more of back then)* only to find that standing in front of the mirror I couldn’t even see the top of my head. Stretch hung the mirror so that *“he”* could see himself in it, which meant that the bottom of the mirror was probably at 6’ 2” or 3”. I had to jump to try to see myself in it. Try combing your hair that way!

Now, why tell this story? Well, I tell it to demonstrate that we all approach life from a certain perspective. For Stretch, living in the *“ether”* above the rest of us, hanging that mirror near the stratosphere, made perfect sense. That’s where he lived. For us *“trolls”* who live a little bit closer to *terra firma*, our perspective, is, shall we say, a bit more diminutive.

However, that we all approach life with our own perspective on things is inarguable. As much as journalists love to argue that they are not biased in their reporting, they are. They have a perspective on things and it does reflect in their reporting despite their protests. Everyone here today has political opinions *(some more than others)* and, let’s be honest, it’s hard to even fathom the opposition’s political viewpoint. Our perspective in life provides the prism through which we view and interpret life.

This holds true with our relationship with God as well. Whether you realize this or not, we are all born with a certain perspective regarding our Creator. In fact, we are hardwired with that perspective from birth and it literally takes an act of God to rewire us. Do you know what that perspective is? Well, we are all born as natural creatures of the Law. We see the world and our relationship with God through the prism of the Law.

What do I mean by that? Well, as a consequence of sin, we view God and our relationship with him thinking that it is based upon our having *“to do”* something. We are born thinking that if we want God to love us, we need to do something to make him love us. If I want to make sure that God does not get angry with me, I need to make sure I don’t do those things that make him angry. Every religion, apart from Christianity, reflects this view. The onus for assuring you are right with God is on you. Through your obedience and through your good deeds you make God like you. This is man’s natural perspective, and even for we who have come to faith, we slip back into that mode all the time. It is so very easy for us to think that our life and faith are all about what we must do.

And, you know what? I can prove this to you based on our gospel lesson for today concerning the Canaanite woman. I want you to think about the story for a moment and interpret it in your own mind. See what comes up as your first sort of knee-jerk reaction to the text and its meaning for you and me. Let me help set the background. Here we have a woman in great need. Her daughter is possessed by a demon. She comes to Jesus for help. He doesn’t answer her but she persists. The disciples even encourage Jesus to send her away. But she won’t go away. Jesus even seems to call her a *“dog,”* which even for a middle easterner today is a huge insult, but she is not deterred. She will not leave until he grants her prayer, which, Jesus does after commending her for her faith.

OK, interpret it for me. What’s the point? My bet is that the most of you think this is a story about being persistent and that this Canaanite woman is, therefore, an example to us of being persistent in our relationship with Jesus. Consequently, the application for us is that we need to be like the Canaanite woman and not give up so easily on our prayers and our petitions to Jesus. If the answer seems to be *“no”* at first, don’t be dissuaded. Keep after him. If only he sees your persistence, as he did this woman, if only you prove to him that your faith really is strong, he will answer your prayers as well.

Does that pretty well sum up what you were thinking? If it does, that is understandable. After all, there is no doubt that the woman here is being persistent and, if I am to be at all honest with you, that’s not too far away from the way I viewed this story up until recently. As I said earlier, our perspective naturally comes from the Law and even as a pastor I am not immune. Our spiritual reflex is to immediately think that we need to do something.

That Law perspective means that we tend look at a text in the bible as a guide; as something to show us what to do. In this case, the Canaanite woman becomes our model and the formula for success. What that means, then, is that we walk away from this story with the idea that somehow, if we want our Lord to grant us his mercy, we have to muster up inside of ourselves a level of persistence equal to her’s. We must demonstrate before Jesus that we really, really, really do have faith. We must prove ourselves to him that he might then be gracious to us. If it worked for her, then maybe, just maybe, it will work for us as well. So, storm the gates of heaven with your prayers. Pound on the threshold of God’s holy, heavenly sanctuary until he answers. If it worked for this Canaanite woman, then it should work for you too.

However, do you see the problem with this? It sets you up for failure. Just evaluate your own prayer life for a moment. Better yet, think of time when there was really something you wanted from God; a dear one was sick, a friend was dying, someone you love was in harm’s way. You prayed about it, but how much did you pray? Did you pray once, twice, maybe even three times? Was that enough? Were your prayers fervent enough? Did your mind wander as you said them? Did you think about other things and lose focus in the middle of your prayers? Martin Luther has a great quote regarding prayer and our sinful nature. He once said, *“We cannot even make it through one Our Father without sinning.”* I think that true and if that is the case, when will you ever prove your worthiness to God so that he might answer you? If most of us cannot persist in focusing through even one prayer, how will we ever prove ourselves to God?

Worse, what if your prayer went unanswered? Does that mean you didn’t do enough? What if you had prayed just one more time? What if you had not given up and stopped?

My dear friends in Christ, the problem with this “*Law”* perspective is that it places us into the realm of insecurity. If it is up to us to figure out what we must do and how much we are to do, how are we ever going to know when we have done enough? We are going to live in a perpetual state of uncertainty regarding our relationship with God. Even the best of our efforts is tainted by sin. Even our most fervent prayers are never fervent enough. We are always distracted, always diverted and always sidetracked.

So, what is going on here with the Canaanite woman? Well, there is a lesson here for us but the lesson here for us is not about her *“persistence.”* The lesson here is about her *“position.”* All we need to know about this woman comes to us in her first words to Jesus, *“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.”* *“Have mercy on me.”* What does this woman realize about her position before the Lord her God? She is a beggar. While this woman’s persistence is commendable, what is truly commendable is that she comes to Jesus recognizing that she has absolutely nothing to offer him. She is a beggar. She is completely and totally in a state of dependence. Her beloved daughter is possessed by a demon. It is a situation completely out of her control. She is at the mercy of Jesus. It is her posture before her Lord that is remarkable. She doesn’t even engage the disciples who tell Jesus to send her on her way. She doesn’t argue that she is just as worthy as they. She instead falls to her knees before Jesus again, with a simple plea, *“Help me.”* So empty is she before her Lord that she sees no shame in acknowledge that, yes, she is a dog but one who is willing to accept even the crumbs that fall from the table if those crumbs come from the hand of Jesus. She is a beggar who makes no attempt to prove her spiritual worth or the strength of her faith. She comes to Jesus with nothing.

However, here is the irony: in her *“beggarly”* state, she actually proves what great faith she has. My dear friends in Christ, we have the wrong idea of what it means to have a strong faith. A true and strong faith is a faith that recognizes its total reliance upon Jesus and his mercy. It is not one that proves its independence but it dependence. Our spiritual life and health depend not on what we give to Christ but on what we receive from Christ. We exercise our faith by becoming beggars before God. And that’s not easy for us who like to believe that we are the producers of spiritual goods and the owners of spiritual gifts. We don’t like being beggars. The word itself is offensive to us because it puts us in a position of being needy. It puts our lives completely and totally into the hands of someone else on whom we must trust for mercy.

Haley, today you are confessing your faith in Christ before God and this congregation. And if there has been one point that I tried to drive home throughout confirmation, it is this: you bring nothing to the table when it comes to your salvation. Now, you are a good kid. Granted, you parents might want to dispute that, but having you in class was always a joy. You are very polite. You are very respectful and you gave thoughtful answers to questions I asked. However, you are still a sinner and that is the bottom-line perspective when it comes to standing before God. As good a person as you are, none of that counts. You, as do us all, stand before God as did this Samaritan Woman. That is, a sinner in need of God’s mercy.

Do you know what we are before God? We are beggars. Beggars is what we are. Really, what can you offer to God? Our works, as Isaiah says, are but filthy rags. Even our prayers are tainted by sin. We own nothing for the world is the Lord’s and everything in it. We don’t even own ourselves. He owns us. He created us. We are his.

And when Jesus draws out this conversation with the Canaanite woman, it is not to be capricious or cruel, but I believe it is him seeing the quality of this beggar’s faith and taking the time to marvel at it so that his disciples, who continually saw everything from a Law perspective, might see what true faith looks like. She approaches Jesus in just the way he wishes to be approached, that is, empty and waiting to be filled. Of course, that is what Jesus does. He fills her by healing her daughter and commending her faith.

So, it is with us also. Our faith grows when we realize that we too are beggars before Jesus. Our faith is strengthened when we realize before our Lord just how weak and dependent we really are. In fact, did you realize that we do this at least five times during our worship services? We begin by acknowledging our sin before God in the confession as we flee to his infinite mercy. In the *Kyrie*, we begin by approaching our Lord with the same words of the Canaanite woman, *“Lord, have mercy.”* In the *Gloria*, we stand before God the Father, together with the angels in the heavenly realm, and ask for Jesus to intercede for us with him there. In the *Prayer of the Church* we beg for help from God for the entire church, the entire world and for all people everywhere. But most significantly, in the *Agnus Dei, “the Lamb of God*”, we come as beggars to Jesus, asking him who died for us to have mercy on us, to forgive us and to renew us.

And for those who bow before him as beggars, for those who come empty, do you know what Jesus does? He fills them up. He gives not the crumbs from the table but his very body and blood and the fruits of his cross. He gives the life and salvation that he won when he bore our sin and the sin of the world to the cross, dying in our place, that we might live. He gives forgiveness to those in need and my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, we are most definitely in need. He gives his gifts to you and to me, again, not because we have proven the strength of our faith but exactly because we acknowledge our weakness. Jesus loves beggars. Jesus loves you.

My fellow redeemed, the last words of Martin Luther before he died were scribbled on an old scrap of paper and they reflected the proper perspective that Luther had throughout his life. He wrote, *“We are beggars. This is true.”* Now there is faith. In his dying hour he looked back not at all he had done to preserve the gospel. He didn’t talk about all the sermons he preached or the books about Christ he had written. He instead acknowledged his position before God. He was a beggar on whom God, for the sake of the death and resurrection of Jesus, had great mercy. That was his perspective and I can imagine the voice of Jesus saying, “*Great is your faith!”* And, as we are beggars too, we look forward to our Lord saying the same to us. In Jesus name. Amen.