

File: Pentecost 11A Matthew 15: 21-28

Dear Friends in Christ, Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen!

He was seven years old when he had to work to support his family. At nine, his mother died. He was 23 when he incurred a huge debt due to a failed business. At 28 after being engaged for four years his girls friend told him no. He found love again but lost her when she died. At 37, on his third attempt he was elected to congress but after two years in office his re-election bid failed. At age 41 his four year old son died.

At 45 he ran for senate and lost. At 49 he ran again but lost and went through a long period of depression amidst all of the rejection, criticism and rumors. Some people just don't know when to cut their losses and quit do they? At 51 he became president of the United States, his name Abraham Lincoln. He's one of the great stories of persistence in our countries history..

Let me ask you a few questions this morning about persistence: Do you have a hard time trusting God and persisting in faith amidst your difficulties? Oh sure it's easy to say "someone always has it worse" and that's true, but your difficulties are your difficulties and they can get pretty heavy? Do you have a hard time persisting in faith when God seems silent or slow in responding to your prayers? Have you been praying about the same situation for weeks, month's even years and God seems silent and the prayers once fueled by great passion and belief have turned into a few phrases you utter out just out of duty, or the prayers have gone by the wayside.

Is your faith under pressure as you look around the world, the threats of war and incredible amounts of hate speech and violence we're seeing and you wonder, where in the heck is God?

Do you ever wonder if anything or anybody ever really changes? Do you sometimes just feel like cutting your losses with The Lord? By that I mean to start looking at faith as something as nothing more than a small slice of a balanced life, kind of like eating smaller portions, or getting a little exercise or making sure we get enough fruits and vegetables. But yet when the real pressures of life mount There's really not much trust and it all comes back to you and The Lord's been left out of the equation?

Whether it's Abraham Lincoln and his incredible persistence in life or the incredible persistence in faith of the Canaanite woman in the Bible passage we need encouragement to push through those times when we are tempted to "cut our losses" with God or to just give in or give up when it comes to really trusting The Lord with everything including the really trying things in life even when they don't turn out the way we want.

In the passage we've got this woman who is from Canaan. The fact that she's identified as being from Canaan is really important because it means she wasn't Jewish. Her daughter is suffering and the Bible says "terribly" from demon possession. Her daughter is in a bad way and Jesus doesn't even answer this mother when she calls out to him "Lord, son of David, have mercy on me, my daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession." Her words are met with complete silence from Jesus. Ever felt like your prayers and words to God were met with complete silence—I thought so, who hasn't. When God seems silent it's tempting to want to cut our losses with God.

And as if Jesus' silence isn't enough the disciples want her out of their hair and say to Jesus "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us." They want nothing to do with her both because she's a woman and also because she's not Jewish. I thought these were the guys who

were supposed to ‘get it’. You know, who Jesus really is and yet they buy into all of the cultural stereotypes and think both they and Jesus should have nothing to do with her.

Not only can God’s seeming silence seem deafening but like the woman we may wonder if God really wants to have anything to do with us. We can all talk the talk about how God loves everybody hears our prayers and loves sinners and all of the rest but on the inside we know the kinds of thoughts that go through our heads, the kinds of thoughts we know we shouldn’t have, the things we’ve done in secret, the inner attitudes we don’t like to admit we have. And we may wonder why would God REALLY want to have anything to do with me? Why would God spend any time with me-why would the Lord actually care about somebody like me? And it’s tempting to want to cut our losses with God.

And as if that’s not tough enough to lay on this woman even Jesus says to her *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel”*. Since she’s not an Israelite and Jesus seems to imply he wasn’t sent for her. Talk about piling on.

Then in spite of both the disciples and even Jesus himself being in her face she kneels before him and pleads *“Lord, help me”*. And Jesus makes an outrageous statement *“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”* WOW! Is Jesus saying just because she’s not Jewish he’s not going to help her? Is he telling her because she’s not from the right ethnic background or doesn’t have the right pedigree that if he helped her it would be like taking food from a child and giving it to a dog? Nobody would take food from a starving child and give it to a dog and yet that’s what he says.

And then she one ups Jesus and says *“Yeah but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”* We’re not talking here about sneaking your dog a nice scrap under

the table. She's basically saying Yeah I know I'm not Jewish, I know I don't have the right pedigree, I know I haven't crossed all of the T's and dotted all of the I's AND I don't fit into all of the perfect religious categories that your disciples think I should but I'm pleading with you, I've knelt before you and worshipped you as Lord.

This woman has faced ridicule and rejection from the disciples for coming to Jesus, even the words of Jesus lead us to wonder about him in this setting but then and here's the twist he says "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted."

She was persistent. I would certainly like to think and here I borrow from an author that His silence tried her faith, but did not conquer it; she pleaded still. The Lord responded the way he did to her, not to destroy her faith, but to develop it. The effect was to develop, strengthen, and manifest her faith. His silence was not without purpose, and certainly not out of unconcern for this woman's need. She was not discouraged to the point of giving up by Jesus' seeming denial. She waited and held on, believing. She chose not to cut her losses with The Lord.

With all of the hate speech and acts of violence that going on in our country there are a lot of people that easily toss around some ugly labels—sadly, some of it fueled by religious beliefs. One of the big ideas of this passage is that sometimes when we're pretty sure whose in and whose out, who God loves and who God doesn't, who the jerks are who the "good Christians" are, we might be surprised when God reverses things. When God loves people who look different and think different from us.

According to the outside world this woman had no right to come to Jesus or any hope that he would grant her request. After his initial silence she had every reason to cut her losses with

Jesus and go on her way. However, Jesus ultimately responded and didn't see the labels, didn't abide by what religiously acceptable.

In fact when Jesus responds and says "Woman great is your faith" he doesn't call her a Canaanite woman but simply woman. To Jesus she will never be defined by national or religious prejudice again. What he saw was a woman who fell at his feet and worshipped him in the face of great obstacles---A woman who chose not to cut her losses with God and be persistent in her faith.

In addition to the big idea that God doesn't see people and situations the same way we do and doesn't use the same kinds of labels that get tossed around so easily the second big idea is that we are encouraged to be persistent like this woman.

Don't be deterred in your faith by the religious watchdogs who think they get to stand at the door and check id's, don't be deterred even by the thoughts that rumble through your head that God would never have anything to do with you until you shape up—or with anyone else until they shape up. Don't be deterred in your faith by the unanswered prayers or what's going on in the world. And we certainly live in a time where hatred and violence and prejudice of all kinds are at the forefront of the news and the systems of this world don't work well for everybody. And we are to stand for justice and mercy as Christ did.

But let's not ever place our ultimate hope in other people, ourselves or many made systems to be able to do for us what only The Lord can do and that is to reach out and bring peace and healing and forgiveness to our soul. In those moments when you are tempted to cut your losses with God, remember the woman from Canaan and be persistent in your faith. Amen!

Let us pray...

