



# ST STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Sunday February 14th, 2016 – Lent II

*“And she said, Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table. Then Jesus answered and said unto her, O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.”*

## ✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

This passage, more than almost any other in the New Testament, has provided a real challenge to Christians, to scholars, and to the authors of innumerable commentaries and expositions. In it, they see a Jesus who is quick to rebuke even when the person he's rebuking isn't a Pharisee or a Sadducee. We always get a laugh when Jesus, the master of retorts, knocks a Pharisee or a spoiled rich kid down a peg or two. We shouldn't, of course, as we're often no better than they are; but we still can't help but smile when we see them get their comeuppance. This time though, it appears that the person being shut down with a sharp tongue isn't a self-important religious leader - it's a sad, desperate mother who wants nothing more than the healing of her daughter. And Jesus, who has previously been so quick to heal people and to show mercy, on the surface seems to be telling her to tell her to take a hike; but that's not the case.

Jesus, as we know, was without spot of sin. He had a sinless birth, lived a sinless life, and was so beyond reproach in death that He even prayed for those putting Him to death. After all, the core purpose in God putting on a skin suit and walking the Earth in the person of Jesus Christ was to set Creation aright; to become one of us in every way except our sinful nature, that He might redeem us.

And although we know that Jesus did not experience sin, we know He otherwise experienced the full range of human emotion - happiness, sadness, anger - and right now, probably a profound amount of

frustration. The start of this passage says *“Jesus went thence, and departed into the coasts of Tyre and Sidon.”* The Revised Version of the KJV uses the word “withdrew” here. Jesus' withdrawal was due largely to both the hostilities of the Pharisees, and the abandonment of friends and would-be disciples. The withdrawal was due not cowardice, but because He still had to teach His disciples, and a temporary retreat was necessary in order to accomplish such a thing. This is not long after Jesus spoke in the synagogue at Capernaum in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Saint John. If you refer to the sixth chapter of John, right after Jesus' speech in the synagogue, it says:

*“From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him. Then said Jesus unto the twelve, Will ye also go away?”*

*Then Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God. Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?”*

In that context, we are now catching Jesus in all His humanity, sitting here with His disciples, and pondering what might well be the closest He feels to some sort of defeat. The people He's been sent to redeem have largely challenged Him and ignored Him even though tradition teaches that God will use the Hebrews to save the world. Then this woman, this *Canaanite* woman has the gall to show up and ask for help. Remember, Canaanites were far worse than

your average heathen - these were people the Hebrews had been bidden to destroy. This woman's religion and culture and ethnicity make her an amalgamation of everything the first century Jews hated. Yet here she is, addressing Jesus with His Messianic title, "Lord, Son of David" and asking for His help in healing her daughter.

And it seems that Jesus rebukes her, but he's not. He's actually shutting down His disciples who are being very prideful at the moment. These fellows are proud of themselves that they are among the chosen few who sit at the right hand of this "great military leader". They see themselves as sitting in the court of this great military leader who has shown up, as they understand it, to kick some Roman butt. They're telling him, "get rid of this woman, she's a hassle; she's not one of us." And Jesus sits down to teach them a lesson. His purpose here is to teach the Apostles (and us) the value of unmitigated faith and persistence in prayer. He even compares her to a dog, something that was common of rabbis of the time to do when describing heathens, although it's not nearly as sharp as it appears when we read it in English. If we were to read it in the Greek, the word is more akin to "little dogs," or house puppies and companion animals. Rather than turn and leave in anger, she persists; not only does she persist, she actually humbles herself by accepting the comparison to a dog. "*Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters' table.*" Seeing her incredible faith, Jesus says "*O woman, great is thy faith: be it unto thee even as thou wilt.*" And her daughter was healed, just like that.

This heathen woman's open, persistent faith in the Messiah must've brought Jesus great joy in this troubling time. His own people are slow to warm to him and quick to abandon Him, and there's a traitor in His own crew. He's sent to save the world, but He can't even trust His immediate friends and confidants. And this heathen woman comes, and through her persistence in prayer, and her absolute humility and lowliness, and the fact that it was fueled by her desire to heal her daughter and not herself, opens her up to the grace of God. Not only that, it provides the Apostles and us with a bold foreshadowing of the greater shower of mercy to come in a short time - the adoption of the gentiles and the whole world into God's family, not just the chosen people.

This woman's humility and persistence provides an opening in an otherwise desolate place for Christ's

mercy and grace to be shown. And our Lord took joy in it. We need to remember that - He takes joy in our faith and in our prayers; He takes joy in our salvation, and in the fellowship of the church. The Holy Ghost delights in guiding our lives and providing comfort and direction to God's people on earth. We impede that fellowship with God when we're too busy or too embarrassed or **too proud** to take our prayers and our needs and our vexations to Christ. And we need to be mindful that no matter how humble we may think ourselves to be, that we can all wind up being prideful. It doesn't matter if you've been a Christian for a week, or if you worship from the pews or at the altar; it doesn't matter if you're the laity of the church or the bishop of the diocese - you're going to have moments where your pride catches you up.

I'm not immune to it myself, and *my vocation* is to know this stuff and to do better. But sometimes we're so focused on fixing a problem ourselves that we sort of intentionally forget to take it to Christ and lay it at His feet and say "Lord, help me." Or we're too content being maudlin and stewing in our own juices that we don't want to admit to Jesus that we've forgotten to take joy in all things, even our stripes. Or we're so anxious about something that we don't want to go to Jesus and say "Lord, I seem to have completely forgotten your teaching that we shouldn't worry about tomorrow, as tomorrow will worry about itself."

When we do that, we're not being forgetful, we're being prideful. And in our pride, we are actually cheating Christ out of something that He delights in - our simple, childlike faith in bringing our troubles to Him, that He might relieve us of all that vexes us. Pride isn't always a matter of bragging about how good we are at something; pride isn't always found in what we say, it's just as often found in what we don't say - "Lord, help me."

Today, this second Sunday in Lent, I want you to leave the things that vex you at the altar rail of the church. When you come up for Communion, I want you to take the holy Sacraments, and I want you to leave all the things you carried with you here, and trust in humility that Christ will take that burden for you and for me, if we're all as humble as the Canaanite woman who otherwise had no claim to Christ's healing, but still dared to ask - Lord, help me.

***In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen***