

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

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Church of the Holy Cross

With a Smile and a Song ...or two!

I want to begin some of the words from the psalm: *“God be merciful to us and bless us, show us the light of your countenance and come to us. Let the peoples praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you. Let the nations be glad and sing for joy...”*

It is *with a smile and a song* that I come to you today. Well, many songs really, as lyrics seem to make their way into my sermons naturally, because God speaks to me through music. God also speaks to me through scripture and today the words from Isaiah set the tone, *“Maintain justice, and do what is right... all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”* Holy Cross is a house of prayer for all people. You all continuously welcome people into this place, whoever they are, and wherever they are on their journey of faith. You are open and show hospitality to all people, and that is how we share God’s love and bring joy into our lives. God wants all people to be joyful, and this house of prayer is for everyone, because God loves everyone, no exceptions.

In the Gospel, the Canaanite woman greets Jesus in the same way others greet Him with pressing needs: “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David.” The Canaanite woman knows of His willingness to show mercy, and she addresses Jesus as “Lord” out of respect, as a man in relation to her as a woman. Her request is a personal one, as it affects her child. She calls Him “Son of David” as a way of acknowledging Jesus as her kin, and as the Jewish Messiah. The Canaanite woman strategically and clearly confronts and informs Jesus of her problem: “my daughter is tormented by a demon.” She does not directly request healing for her child, she desires mercy, which she presumes will lead to healing. After all, the rumor was that people brought their sick and possessed to Jesus, and he healed them even if they simply touched the fringe of his garments. She does not bring her daughter to Jesus, but it is clear that she expects something to happen, and that Jesus will show mercy. We all know how horrible it feels to ask for help and be met with silence. Women’s words are too often met with silence or are interrupted or disrespected, by men and sometimes by other women. Frankly, I would prefer a simple, “NO!” than the silence. Silence can make me doubt myself.

No one immediately responds to the Canaanite woman. The disciples urge Jesus to send her away because, it appears, they are annoyed by her continued shouting, by her persistence and her refusal to take silence for an answer.

Too often we cannot or refuse to empathize with people whose experience is different from our own. If the oppression, injustice, or pain is not happening in our house and neighborhood, or if it does not affect our race, gender, class, or sexuality, then we often dismiss it as unwelcomed, unjustified noise. Jesus’ response to the apostles’ urging to send the Canaanite woman away seems to affirm their desire to dismiss her: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The fact that her people’s blood runs through his veins and that his people’s blood runs through her veins does not move Jesus! If our common humanity, our relatedness, does not move us, what will? The Canaanite woman persists. Like Sojourner Truth, Rosa Parks, Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, Oprah Winfrey, Senator Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, Senator Elizabeth Warren, Bp. Barbara Harris, Senator Kamala Harris, me on my call to the priesthood, the Canaanite woman persisted.

So many anonymous women like the Canaanite woman have persisted as lone minority voices among a majority of authoritative and powerful men. She persisted! She didn't go away; she won't be dismissed. She draws closer and kneels, and in the vernacular of a determined woman she cries, "Master, help me." Her plea is met with the language of cultural difference and distance: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

I am not exactly sure *who let the dogs out* that made their way into the Gospel, but it appears that in antiquity, Greeks and other Gentiles had a more familiar relationship with household pets, particularly with dogs, than did the average Jewish person. The ancient Greeks may have been more likely to have dogs as endeared household pets that they fed *under* the table than would have been the case in many Jewish households. When I went to Pompei in the 1990s, the mosaics and the large number of Pompei dogs sleeping was remarkable—it was clear they were loved. I am convinced this is where we get the phrase, "Let sleeping dogs lie." This cultural difference might explain the woman's response: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." The Canaanite woman's cultural context differs from Jesus'; the Canaanites allow their pets to be fed *while* the children eat. One can feed the children *and* feed the pets too!

Matthew strategically calls what this woman does an act of faith. Yet Jesus does not perform an exorcism; he simply says, "Let it be done for you as you wish." He does not say let it be done as you believe, but as you will. The woman's will manifested by her persistence identified as faith led to her daughter's healing. Perhaps faith engenders persistence or maybe persistence feeds faith. Either way, persistence and faith make a powerful pair.

When you pray, it is ok to simply ask God for mercy. Jesus does know what we need, and I think if we trust God, we will get what we need if we ask only for mercy. I am glad I persisted in following God's Call. I will never forget *The Long and Winding Road* that led to your door. This door, the door of Holy Cross. A door that welcomed Sylvia and me, a door that opened the way to my priesthood, a door that opened up our lives to new friends and opportunities to serve God. Before I walked through your door, I rejected the idea of becoming your Interim Director of Formation—I rejected the offer from Wes and the committee three times. Then Wes wrote me and simply told me that my start date would be in January. He persisted, like the woman in the Gospel today, and you got me. Even better, I/we got all of you. The road that led to this door was indeed very long. God called me, and with me, Sylvia, to travel that road despite the adversities we met along the way, we persisted, I persisted, and I walked through that door.

Love is the opening door, love is what we came here for, no one could offer you more. There are more roads—one 1,200 mile road to be specific, in front of Sylvia and me—and a new path of ministry to walk with the people of Good Samaritan, Clearwater. I will be there, and you will be here, *doing that thing you do, as the Holy Cross branch of the Body of Christ.* We are *all together now*, and through our common worship and our ministry we will never be disconnected. Love connects us. As the electric company says, "we are connected by more than just power lines." We are connected by our relationship with God. Jane Goodall was known to have said, "*You cannot get through a single day without having an impact on the world around you. What you do makes a difference, and you have to decide what kind of difference you want to make.*" All of you here have hope for the future, for new opportunities to grow and love each other and the world. Do not be afraid, Jesus is with you, and God wants you to have joy. Bishop Brooke-Davidson wrote a reflection about a week back that emphasized how important it is to focus on the right things along the way. Sure, it will get hot, and rain will fall, but beauty surrounds us if we look for it—so look for it. Stop and pay attention to beauty, take time to rest, because *Sitting in the grass is a gas baby, can you dig it?*

Live into the wonder of the adventure that awaits you as you begin your walk with a new priest—new joys and new possibilities await. Believe that *Somethin's comin', something good*. And always remember that what you do matters.

Peace to all of you. Amen.

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The comments on the Gospel were adapted from: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=4542

Isaiah 56:1,6-8, Psalm 67, Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28