

Matthew 15: 10-28, August 14, 2011

Dog Food or Living Bread?

When I was teaching special education, I had a lot of students who had seizure disorder, which is also called epilepsy. It is a very scary thing to watch a child have a seizure. There is really nothing you can do for them except lay them on their side and talk to them so they know someone is there, and make sure that nothing is close to them that could hurt them.

I know some of you are familiar with seizures, too, so you know what I'm talking about. The seizure takes control and all the person and any bystanders can do is to wait it out.

Sometimes, you wonder if the seizure will ever end. And sometimes you wonder if the person will still be alive when it does end.

That worry can lead to desperation, to hopelessness and despair. Sometimes parents have made incredibly hard choices trying to help their children---trying things like brain surgery to remove the part of the brain where the seizures are located, or medications so strong that the child sleeps most of the time. These desperate measures don't always work, despite how radical they are.

The woman in this morning's scripture passage was desperate. She had watched her daughter have seizures time and time again. There was no medical technology available, no medication to control the seizures, no understanding of what might trigger the seizures.

For something to control her daughter's movements, her life in that way---you could say that the seizures possessed her---that the demon of epilepsy took over her body.

The desperation that this woman felt was complete. There was nothing she could do to help her daughter, and with every seizure I can believe that it seemed to her that her little girl might die, and that in fact was a very real possibility! Desperation can cause us to do things that we otherwise would never consider doing.

I am sure that under normal circumstances this Canaanite woman would never have dared to approach a group of Jewish men in the street. She would not have been so bold as to shout at Jesus or to follow him.

It was not socially acceptable for a woman to interact with a man who was not her husband, especially one of a different ethnicity.

She would not have broken the unwritten rules this way for any reason other than to help her little girl, so when she heard that Jesus, the

teacher and healer, was in town, she decided---I will break all the rules, say whatever I need to say, humble myself, do whatever it takes---just let my little girl be well! Let her live!

Any parent can relate to this. Most parents would sacrifice their own lives for their children's. Most parents would gladly humiliate themselves if it meant their child would be well and alive and happy.

And so when this woman took this chance, stepped out of her comfort zone, showed such desperation and passion and so much courage, we are shocked to find out Jesus' reaction.

When she was shouting after him, Jesus ignored her. It was the proper thing to do, but Jesus was so often improper that we are taken by surprise. It is hard for us to understand, not only that he ignored her, but what he said to her!

Jesus, who welcomed people of all kinds to come to him, who healed a centurion's servant, who spoke to a Samaritan woman at the well, suddenly slams the door on this woman who only wants her daughter to live a healthy, long life!

He said something so harsh and exclusivist that we have a hard time accepting it at face value---he said, "It is not right to take the food out of

the mouths of children and give it to dogs!” Jews quite often derided the Canaanites by calling them dogs, but it only adds to our shock and confusion to hear those words from our loving Lord! It seems so out of character for him! We say that God is good all the time, but how were these words, this derogatory term for Canaanites, good?

This question has caused many scholars and preachers to try to explain this statement away. They want to believe that Jesus was joking with her, that he was trying to make some kind of point to his disciples, or that he was just testing her faith and her determination.

But none of that is clear from the scripture, and so I have to take the words that are there and try to understand them, without adding anything to them or making assumptions.

And when I read it and take it at face value, it seems to me that Jesus changed his mind, that he was at first not going to help her, but then after she answered him back, after she pointed out that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table, he did heal her daughter.

It seems pretty clear to me. And even though it goes against the grain to think that anyone could convince Christ to change his mind, this makes a lot of sense to me.

After all, if Christ is not going to change, if God will never ever do anything differently than he started out to do, why do we pray?

If prayer is not going to change what happens, why do we bother?

Some people will tell you that it changes the one who prays, and that's true.

But why, then, do we pray for people in other places, for people we don't even know, for people who don't know we are praying for them?

Yes, it might change us, but is that the only outcome we want?

Is prayer a purely selfish act? I don't think so.

When the woman asked Jesus to heal her daughter, and he answered by healing the little girl, I am sure that the woman's life changed, that she was changed by the experience. I am just as sure that the little girl was changed---healed of her epilepsy and made capable of living a normal life from then on.

I don't know how that works. I only know that it does.

And more than the woman being changed and the little girl being changed, Jesus was changed, too! He learned something.

He was sent to the people of Israel, yes, but in this act he broadened his purpose. His primary goal was to reach the Jewish people with the Good

News, but he was also sent to heal and to save people from every nation who admit their need of God! People like the Canaanite woman and her daughter. People who are desperate and who put their own egos aside, who put aside the rules of society, who look only to Jesus for healing and for help.

So, what makes you desperate? What is so important to you that you would risk being humiliated, rejected, and scorned? What brings you to Christ on your knees?

Last week I talked to you about getting out of the safety of the boat to take the risk of walking on water. Today, what I'm talking about is even scarier. What would make you shout out in public for help? What would make you risk public ridicule and rejection? What would make you fall on your knees and beg someone who is clearly not willing to help you?

I believe in the power of prayer and in the effectiveness of praying for others, but mostly these are not prayers of desperation for me. Mostly I am sincere, I am earnest, I am serious, but not necessarily desperate.

There have been times, though, when I have sweat blood praying from the depths of my soul, storming the gates of heaven, you might say, in desperation and persistence, much like this woman in this story.

Times when people I love have been deathly ill. Times when I have been desperate to know what to do. Times when I had no other way out of hopelessness and fear but to fall down in front of Christ and shout and beg and insist and persist!

I know that many of you have had times like that, too! Times when there was no one else to turn to and it seemed like God was ignoring you, heading the other way, and you threw yourself in front of him to make him listen.

Maybe you even felt like he was calling you a dog and you answered right back---Yes, Lord, but even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table! Just throw me a crumb! Help me! Have mercy on me! Answer my prayer! When you prayed like that, what was the answer to that prayer? Even if you didn't see an answer at the time, can you look back and see an answer now?

In my most desperate moments, I have often felt that God turned a deaf ear to my prayers. Sometimes I felt worthless or invisible to God, as if I were only a dog to be turned away.

It's only in looking back that I can see that God did answer those prayers, not in the way I wanted, but in a way that was even better for me than what

I was asking for. It's only in looking back that I can see that God was taking care of me, loving me, holding me close to his heart in a way that I was not even considering. Is that true for you? Think about your most desperate, hopeless times. What happened next?

I have to think that life got better for you! That you somehow regained a feeling of hope, a reason to go on where you thought you couldn't, that the time of pain and suffering ended! And what was the end of all that except an answer from God?

Yes, your prayer just might change God's actions, but maybe it doesn't do it in the way you might think! God, who sees a bigger, more complete picture than you or I do, answers your prayer in another way.

A way that often puts an end to suffering and pain, a way that often brings people, including you, closer to God.

The human condition of sickness and struggle does not always allow for the kinds of miracles we ask for, but God is always in those times with caring and love and holy presence, holding us close to his heart. We don't often see people healed instantaneously. We don't often see people saved from the physical death that we are praying not to happen.



God doesn't heal everyone. It is not because we are not persistent enough or passionate enough in our prayers.

After all, God did not save Jesus from crucifixion even though he prayed with all his heart that "this cup would be taken away from him."

Death and suffering are engrained in the human condition. All of us suffer. All of us die. And while we sometimes do see miraculous healings and rescues, the way that God most often saves us is by being present with us as we suffer and as we die.

Because, as Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, NOTHING can separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ---not death or pain, not principles or powers, not ANYTHING! Nothing can separate us from God's love---NOTHING!

Death did not separate Christ from God and it is the same for us.

Even though Christ referred to the Canaanites as dogs in this encounter with a Canaanite woman, he did not send her away. He did not step away and turn his back when she came to him and knelt down before him. He may have been reluctant at first to heal her daughter, but in the end he did not refuse.

He could have given her dog food, throwing her nothing but a dry bone to chew on as he turned and left. Instead, he heard her prayer and healed her daughter. He gave her what only he could give----a piece of Living Bread! A piece of himself.

He may have insulted her and tried to discourage her, but in the end, he gave her compassion and love and healed her little girl.

Christ is always compassionate. When we cry out for mercy, when we ask him to help us, he responds by being present in our lives.

Michelle, one of my former students had seizures often, and they came one after another in episodes that lasted 45 minutes or more. One day I came back into the room after lunch to find the paramedics in my classroom. Michelle had stopped breathing during one of these series of seizures and my assistant had called 911. When I walked into the room and saw Michelle surrounded by paramedics, gray and still, I thought she was dead. I went to my assistant and we stood with arms around each other. I don't know about her, but I was praying.

And as we watched, the color came back into Michelle's face and we saw that she was breathing again as they carried her out to the ambulance.

Two days later, she was back in class, her life restored to us. God is good, all the time, even though Michelle continued to have seizures. She was still a light among us.

God is not in the business of giving us dog food. God feeds us, all of us, with the Living Bread that is Jesus Christ, God-with-us, God who is the great I AM stands beside us, holds us tightly, and gives us what we need. All we have to do is ask.

Amen.