

### **A Civil War to Win (Lent 2 Matthew 15:21-28)**

Our politicians are priming themselves for an election they say that they don't really want. But sooner or later it will come and you'll see a common sight on the front lawn of many homes. It's not every home. Some like me like to keep their ballet secret. But others are most into it and on the front lawn of their homes you'll sometimes see the signs. And then of that select number a special group with "His sign" "Her sign" and then the signs of voting age children. Even non-voting age children are encouraged by their schools to have debates as a training ground for their voting future. I walk by some such house and can't resist the comment "Must be mighty interesting around the breakfast table". I fancy myself a newspaper reporter at times and think I've got a scoop for the "Life" pages of the Toronto Star "A Family Divided". "Civil War in the Home".

But that family survives. I have observed election after election. And why not? What are they discussing anyways? Depending on whether the upcoming election is federal or provincial it's the use of money, the division of resources, foreign policy. All these are weighty issues to be certain. But these are all things of the world. And for the Christian, "this world is passing away".

No, the rougher division resides in an increasing number of homes separated by the cross and the crescent; the indivisible God-Man Jesus Christ or numerous idols either secular or pagan. And when you find yourself in that situation, and an increasing number of people in these last days are, only God's grace and mercy can sustain you then. For there is an eternal battle waging there between light and darkness, good and evil, angels and demons. All are warring over eternal souls. We ought not to feel strange that some such thing has fallen upon us. You can take all the right precautions. You can raise your children in the faith. You can even marry in the faith. But stuff happens. And when it does we ought not to feel strange about it. Jesus says,

<sup>34</sup> "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. <sup>35</sup> For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> And a person's enemies will be those of his own household. (Matthew 10:34-36)

Now while the Scripture from Matthew which forms my introduction to today's message merely outlines the problems of the family, the Gospel reading from today's text gives an example of a woman living solutions to the problem in faith and prayer.

You see, the Canaanite woman is a woman of great faith. She no doubt came from a pagan background but by her faithful approach of our Lord Jesus you see a living active faith in her soul. You see, even those of great faith can have angels and demons battling across the thresholds of their homes. Her daughter, no doubt finding herself enamoured by the pagan idols surrounding her so prevalent in that culture, is possessed by a devil. We don't hear about other members of the family. Maybe she was alone in the world with her daughter or as in so many cases; they were in varying degrees of indifference or denial of the spiritual realm. In any case she is the one who engages in the battle and while apathy or despair may have overwhelmed her husband, parents, in-laws, aunts and uncles and the cousins she exercises the faith that was given to her and comes to Jesus.

She may live abroad but she knows Jesus. She must also know something about the Old Testament and uses an Old Testament title for the Christ coming to him saying "Son of David".

“Have mercy upon me.” As a woman of faith the Canaanite woman knows who she is. How many of us come to Jesus knowing exactly where we stand? How many of us carry some expectations of what Jesus might do for us as we might negotiate a raise before the boss at company head office. I have served you in exemplary and invaluable service these many years and now Lord can you not do this simple thing?

No, the woman comes knowing and acting like she knows her true place in the world. Now Christian brothers and sisters, we claim to know. We say the words as the Canaanite woman at every worship service. “Lord, have mercy”. This is the Kyrie. And maybe we’ve rendered it too musically melodious so the dirge sounds like a beautiful offering. Even after our sins are forgiven, we retain our humble posturing “Lord, have mercy”. We have not yet studied the worship service in our Lutheranism 101 class but we will. And we’ll discover that the words of the Canaanite woman, our words at the Kyrie are shared by other faithful supplicants to our Lord such as the Ten Lepers. We retain such an attitude in Luther’s explanation of each of the Ten Commandments: “We should fear and love God...” The psalmist declares that “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom”. Truly, this woman has a faith and wisdom as she approaches the Lord.

Jesus doesn’t respond. It’s not expected. When she persists she is met with a rebuke: “I can’t give the children’s bread to the dogs. We pray with great expectations. But our Lord does not always respond in the way we hope. How then shall we cope?

On Wednesday we dealt with a similar episode of our God not responding in the expected or hoped for way. Abraham was not expecting the command to sacrifice Isaac. The woman was not expecting silence from her Shepherd. In the Old Testament reading for today, Jacob was not expecting to struggle and strive with the Angel. What to do?

The Canaanite woman displays an Abraham-like faith. Abraham was willing to sacrifice his own son, upon who rested the promise of the Messiah, which he steadfastly believed that God could even raise him again from the dead. She had the courage of Jacob become Israel who wrestled with the Lord himself and would not let him go until he blessed him. That is, the Canaanite woman grasped hold of Christ by his words even the strange rebuking type words about being likened to a dog. Like Abraham who puts the best construction on everything that the Lord says, she does likewise and comes up with a marvellous response.

So Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs”.

Enabling her like Abraham who put the best possible construction on everything that the LORD said and did, she turned the reference to dogs to “yes, little dogs that eat the crumbs”.

She knew that even a crumb would be enough. Just as faith the size of a mustard seed is enough so also is a crumb of a word from the Lord enough to bring healing.

She survived the test. Her daughter was healed. She persevered in the faith.

<sup>28</sup> Then Jesus answered and said to her, “O woman, great *is* your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour....

To say that deliverance from the demon would be synonymous with adopting the faith might be stretching the text. But no doubt though, that deliverance from the demon would go a long way in freeing her daughter from the obstacles to faith. The prayers and tears of the saints availeth much. This is what is said in James 5:16 "The prayer of a righteous person has great power as it is working." <sup>17</sup> Elijah

was a man with a nature like ours, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. <sup>18</sup> Then he prayed again, and heaven gave rain, and the earth bore its fruit. The prayers of a righteous man avail much.

Throughout Scripture we are exhorted to embrace an active intercessory prayer for our loved ones, especially for those outside the faith. To encourage us to be persistent in our prayers and never give up Jesus told the parable of the persistent widow. The widow because she was persistent was able to move the heart of an unjust judge to render her justice. Think says Jesus then of how it is when you are persistent with your requests to God who is just.

Then there are the stories of those kinds of Christians who follow with such Scriptural faith. There is the story of Monica, the Mother of St. Augustine whose memory and example we commemorate August 27<sup>th</sup>. The family lived in the fourth century in North Africa. And Monica though a Christian herself had to contend with a pagan husband who ridiculed her faith and a son who in his youthful years, squandered his abilities on living to satisfy his baser passions. Still, over 9 years she prayed for him during his abandonment of the faith.

She also exhorted her pastor to pray. First, her husband came to share her faith on his deathbed.

She implored the local bishop for help in winning him over, and he counseled her to be patient, saying, "God's time will come." Monica persisted in importuning him, and the bishop uttered the words which have often been quoted: "Go now, I beg you; it is not possible that the son of so many tears should perish."

Her well known son Augustine became an answer to prayer. His writings on Justification by faith based on Saint Paul would later influence a certain Augustinian monk named Martin Luther who unintentionally started a Reformation giving Our Saviour a name, Lutheran.

We cannot always help the situations we find ourselves in. Even those closest to us may abandon the faith. It's easy to despair. They may even be tormented by demons. Shall we despair? The Canaanite woman refused to despair. Mother Monica refused to despair. These were women of faith. They persevered for the salvation of their husbands and their children. They were not disappointed. May we likewise persevere in the grace God has given us this day.

Amen.