

Sermon Text for May 8, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 51:4, Matthew 15:21-28

“How is our faith manifested?”

As we gather for worship today on this Mother’s Day, we have to recognize that there is a lot we have in common. The bond that we share as brothers and sisters in Christ is significant, and that is true not just for those of you in this room, but also for the hundreds who are watching virtually either on our website, or on Facebook, or on Youtube. A number of you have mentioned to me that you feel like something significant is about to happen in this church. You explain it as a groundswell that is moving us in a direction that is exciting and full of God’s presence. I would add that the Holy Spirit.

But even as emotionally and viscerally we may feel like we are moving toward something exciting and full of hope and celebration, we are undeniably coming out of a season of loss. But without harping too much on this season of loss, we are also undeniably called to move forward with who we have and what we have and not be apologetic for moving forward without waiting for anyone in the wings. We are called not to change course but to continue to trust that God will be and has been faithful. Know that God will do a deed among us that is not insignificant.

Today for our Mother’s Day Scripture, and yes, we are still in our 9 month Bible reading challenge and so these are Scriptures many of you have already read during this past week, we find a mom who is faced with apparent responses of NO, but does not give up. Can you find any comparisons to a mom and her child and the protection, the perseverance, the insistence that all comes out as a mom tends to her child in the world around her. When you are in the woods you don’t want to get between a momma bear and her what? That’s right, her cubs. Or a momma moose and her what, that’s right, her calf. Now, I’m sure the same can be said for dads too, but that is not the way we have understood it. There is something visceral, animal, desperate even when we are talking about a mom and her kid.

Our Scripture today presents to us a mom who even goes toe to toe with Jesus and wins, just for the sake of saving the life of her daughter because she knew that the only hope she had was if Jesus intervened and helped her daughter. Let’s read.

READ

Now, you should come away from this reading with a bit of an uncomfortable feeling. We did this story in preschool for our chapel time and I'm not going to lie, I changed it. I left out the whole part of the dog and Jesus basically saying no three times before he actually healed the daughter, I just thought it would be too difficult to explain. So here we are today and we have to find a way to understand Jesus' approach while focusing, and this will be our focus today, on the mom's interaction with Jesus and how she manifests her faith in such a way that Jesus seems to change his mind and actually reaches out and helps.

Not every lesson we hear from Scripture is easy to hear and easy to digest. Our Isaiah Scripture does promise us, however, that a teaching will be pronounced if we would only listen to it. We are promised that if we read Scripture we will learn from it, even the difficult Scripture such as this one. Isaiah tells us that it will provide a light for the people and we read in Psalm 119 that the Word of God is a light unto my path. But that doesn't take away from the fact that today we do have a difficult path to follow.

Okay, so what happens, just in case you got lost during the reading. A Canaanite woman screams out to Jesus incessantly as he walks by. I mean, she is obnoxiously crying out to Jesus to help her daughter. The way she is described it is clear that she is a foreigner, from a completely different group of people and even a group of people that has historically been hostile to Jesus and his people. In Matthew 10:5-6, earlier in this book of the Bible, Jesus commands his disciples not to bring the word of God to anyone but the sheep of Israel, the people of Israel, and she was certainly not in that flock of sheep. But she calls out for help. Jesus says nothing, just keeps walking by, and the Scripture makes it very clear that he hears her, and is just, well, there is no other way to say it, he is ignoring her.

The disciples intervene, he tells them, and anyone else who might hear like this mom, that he only came for the sheep from Israel, she gets in his face and asks for help and he responds that it isn't fair to pay attention to the dogs when the sheep need caring for, she responds, and Jesus then ends up healing her daughter. Oh, there is so much more to this story of this persistent Jesus loving mom. On face value a mom is looking for healing for her daughter and faces the only person, Jesus, whom she thinks can help and yet he seems to rebuff her three times in this story until finally he gives in.

We aren't really going to focus on Jesus and his actions, but rather on this mom and her actions, and specifically how her faith was manifested. Matthew is no stranger to lifting up strangers, foreigner, as examples of faith. Remember the Roman Centurion and Jesus' words about him in Matthew 8: Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith.

Let's begin with their first interaction which we find in vs.22-23 where she calls Jesus, Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. Jesus does not answer her at all. She persists and the disciples intervene and say Jesus send her away. But that isn't actually what they say, in the Greek they actually say, basically, Jesus, take care of her need so that she will then go away. Heal her daughter and then she won't bother us any longer. You have things to do and you don't want her following you around yelling and making a scene. Send her away, but the implication in the Greek is meet her need so that she will go away.

But Jesus does not say anything to her at all, so she is facing a time when it seems like Jesus is not going to say anything to her. God is silent in the midst of her prayer. Can anyone relate to that, can I get an Amen from the frozen chosen if there is anyone here who has prayed for healing and for comfort and for strength and for guidance and support and it seems like God just keeps walking and you don't get a single response. What do you do then? Do we keep knocking like the widow in Luke 18 who kept knocking until she got the attention of the judge or do we stop dejected and wonder if this God thing is true after all, does Jesus really have the power and the ability that everyone else is saying that he does. Our faith cannot be manifested just in fits and starts but with a consistent knocking, with constant pleading, with indefatigable perseverance.

When the disciples intervene Jesus seems to respond to them, but clearly she can hear what he is saying when he states that he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel. She responds by getting right in front of him, kneeling before him and asking, you can hear her, please, please help me. It almost seems as if Jesus is saying, you may be a lost sheep, but you are speaking to the wrong shepherd, I'm not your man, go see someone who is from your tribe and your region. Now, he doesn't say all of this, but the implication of his words to his disciples are a veiled NO, just like previously him saying nothing at all to her is an equally veiled, but no less powerful, NO.

Jesus responds to her kneeling at his feet by saying that it wouldn't be fair for the dogs to get what the children are supposed to get. Now, not to take away from the seriousness and the implications of what Jesus just said which should be jarring and cause some consternation as we hear Jesus interact with a needy mom in this manner, but the Greek word that he uses for dog here is actually puppy. Right? It's not that bad, no, it is just as bad.

She responds to this third veiled NO, with a response that even the dogs get the crumbs that fall on the floor from the children's table. This is extraordinary, and I hope you don't miss the power of this answer. She concedes that she is a dog but then asks for nothing more than

what dogs are entitled to, the crumbs that fall from the master's table. The manifestation of our faith has to start with acknowledging who we are. We are sinners. We have to be able to say as David did in Psalm 51:4 – Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what was evil in your sight.

Once we acknowledge that we are sinners, we then have to claim that which is meant for us and given to us as our status as sinners allows, redemption, salvation, grace, unconditional love. We have to claim not only our status as sinners, but also claim the rights of all sinners that God has given them. Namely, the forgiveness of sin. This allows us not only the crumbs, but also to enjoy the banquet as full participants as children of God, as sheep of his pasture.

Jesus' consistent responses to her revealed something different to her than maybe it would to others. His supposed NO of silence left the door open to her for a potential yes. His supposed NO in his statement of the lost sheep left the door open to her for a potential yes. The supposed NO of his comment of the dogs left the door open for a Yes. All of Jesus' responses we can experience and they can each one at each stage send us off the mark, but here we see it makes it clearer for the reader the tremendous faith of the mom who saw the possibilities of the yes in what most would have seen as a somewhat veiled succession of Nos.

Very clearly it is only because of the woman's faith, this mother's faith, that Jesus heals her daughter. As Paul states in Romans 11, we, like the woman, by grace alone have been admitted to the ranks of God's salvation people. The woman is not content to be ignored, because she is convinced that her daughter deserves to be given a chance at living a normal, productive life. Her persistence, based on her faith in a God who can change things for the better, is rewarded.

May we be found with a similar faith. Amen.