

Persistent, Insistent Faith  
Matthew 15:21-28

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*[loudly]* “Lord, Son of David, help my child!” We know this prayer. We have prayed it ourselves, when our children are sick, or in danger, or wandering down the wrong path and we don’t know how to get them back.

*[softly]* “Lord, Son of David, help my child!”

My children are all in their 30s and 40s, but if one of them were in harm’s way today, I would crawl over hot coals to beg for help for them, from anyone who might help me keep them safe and whole. I wouldn’t care if I embarrassed myself, or if I was too loud for the comfort of those around me, as this woman was. I wouldn’t care if what I was praying for seemed hopeless. I would beg doctors and insurers for help. I would set up a Go Fund Me page to raise money for their care, and I wouldn’t be too proud to ask my friends (all of you!) to contribute. I would hold a bake sale and a car wash. Most of all I would pray to God. I know you would do the same.

*[pleading]* “Lord, help my child! Please!”

Because this is our prayer, too, we don’t like Jesus’ first answer. “I was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus says. The woman must have known that this was a possibility. Jesus just happened to be in her neighborhood, on his

way to somewhere else. He hadn't been healing people like her, like her daughter. She was a Canaanite, after all, not an Israelite like him. She knew that approaching him was a risk, possibly doomed to failure, but she persisted, because her daughter was desperately ill, and no one else could help her.

There was a big disagreement at the time that this gospel was written about this very question. Did Jesus come to redeem Israel, or was he sent to the whole world? I have never met anyone who is comfortable with Jesus' first response. "I have only come to redeem Israel." Really? It is so unlike the welcoming, loving Jesus that we know from other passages, and so different from our own experience of him.

And yet the woman persists. She kneels down in front of Jesus and says simply, "Lord, help me."

"Help me."

Now, the Bible Study group would like me to remind you that Jesus was both human and divine, and this passage shows Jesus at his most human. We've all had days when we weren't at our best. Or, God may have sent this woman to Jesus to show him that his mission was wider than he believed. Still, I still can't help hearing this passage from the point of view of the mother and her desperate need.

And so, it is amazing to me that Jesus wants to argue with her further. This is actually a theological argument about the nature of God and of redemption, and not

an equally matched argument, either, since it is between the Son of God and a mother in deep pain. It is the sort of argument that makes seminary students' heads explode. It is the sort of argument that breaks a mother's heart. "What do you mean you won't save my child's life? Lord, help me!"

We don't like Jesus' second response. We don't like it at all. He says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." [*gasp!*] To the dogs! This is so hurtful! He is saying that the people of Israel are children of God, and Gentiles, like the woman kneeling before him, like all of us, are no better than dogs. We ache for this mother, and for ourselves. What if God's love IS restricted? What if it excludes some and favors others? What if it excludes me?

What if it excludes my child?!? That would **not** be okay with me.

The resolution of this argument is central to everything we know and believe about God, and bless this poor Canaanite mother for pressing ahead, for insisting on being heard by the Son of the Living God, because she is pressing forward with our need, too.

She accepts the insult that Jesus has flung at her, calling her a dog, and turns it deftly back to him, with all the skill of two rabbis arguing a point of Torah. She says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." That is, "Even if you have come to redeem Israel, surely there is some crumb of your grace left over for me."

I don't want her to have to say that. I want her simple, urgent need to be enough. Other places in the scriptures tell us that our need IS enough. But here, Jesus says it is her **faith** that wins the day, her persistent, insistent faith that turns him not only toward her daughter but toward the whole world.

"Woman, great is your faith," Jesus says. "Let it be done for you as you wish." And from that moment her daughter is healed. This beautiful, painful gospel story shows us that our faith calls to God's heart, and God responds with love.

Right after this passage, just 3 or 4 verses later, Jesus goes on to feed the multitudes with just a few loaves of bread. I don't think they took attendance that day, or checked national ID cards before they had everyone sit down to lunch. Jesus uses God's abundance to feed all who come. The Canaanite woman's faith has changed the whole trajectory of Jesus' ministry, opening it to the world.

This Canaanite mother's faith opens Jesus' ministry to **us** as well. She has made it safe for **us** to offer our deepest prayers to God, to insist on being heard, to come again and again to kneel before our Lord and ask for what we truly need.

We don't need to worry about crumbs falling from God's table or whether there will be enough to go around. God's abundance feeds multitudes. There is enough for Jews and Gentiles. There are loaves enough for old and young, for women and men and for our siblings who are non-binary or trans, for straight folks and gay folks.

There is plenty at Christ's table for Republicans and Democrats and Independents.  
Enough for citizens and immigrants. Enough for you. Enough for me.

And I thank God for the courageous example of this Canaanite mother, who said simply, "I'd like some of God's grace, too, please, and some to take home to my daughter, who is ill."

Thanks be to God -

Amen