**MATTHEW 15:21–28.** (EHV)

> Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!" But he did not answer her a word. His disciples came and pleaded, "Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered her, "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." "Yes, Lord," she said, "yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire." And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Does it ever seem to you as if God is the enemy? Does it ever seem like he is attacking you? Do you ever feel like the things making you unhappy are things that only he can control? And does it ever seem like he won't let up with his attacks?

What's your reaction to God when that happens?

After God had taken Job's possessions, children, and health from him, Job said these words: "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him" (Job 13:15). We might hear those words and think that Job is just speaking in exaggerated language to make a point.

But then we hear about the example of the faith of this Canaanite woman.

Matthew's Gospel as a whole is aimed at Matthew's own people, the Jews. When he records Jesus's birth, he doesn't talk about the worship of the Jewish shepherds. He talks about how gentile magi traveled hundreds of miles to present him with costly gifts. He loves to cite Old Testament prophecies that Jesus fulfilled. He loves to show ordinary people and despised people referring to Jesus in Messianic terms, even as respected Jewish leaders like the Pharisees and Sadducees reject him. And he already told of the faith of a Roman centurion, about whom Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith."

Now, having just rebuked Peter, one of his own disciples, for his little faith, as we heard last week, and having rebuked the Pharisees for having unclean hearts, he withdraws to a gentile region to show his disciples and to show us what great faith looks like.

And he couldn't have picked a more gentile territory. He "withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon," wealthy port cities on the Mediterranean Sea. Back in Chapter 11, Jesus pronounced woe on some Galilean towns for failing to listen to him and failing to repent, in spite of the miracles they witnessed. He told them that if Tyre and Sidon had seen those same miracles, they would have repented long ago in dust and ashes. That is not a compliment of Tyre and Sidon. That's like if a teacher were to tell her misbehaving students, "I don't know what more I can do for you. Even Hitler would have grown into a model citizen if he had attended this school, but none of you pay any attention to what I say!"

So this territory is as heathen and gentile as they come, and here comes a woman native to that area, crying out, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!" Now some of you have one or more daughters. Imagine if a demon were severely tormenting her young, vulnerable body. We don't know the exact nature of this

torment, but isn't what she says enough to make us feel sorry for her? But at least she is coming to the right person. Jesus has cast out demons on multiple occasions before this, and this gentile woman even addresses Jesus as the "Lord" and as the "Son of David." She is clearly addressing him as the Messiah promised in the Old Testament Scriptures.

But if she ever entertained the thought that her daughter's torture by a demon was an attack from God, she's about to find that these attacks have only just begun. Martin Luther compares her to a tower being fired at by multiple canons. The first canon shot is that she is a gentile woman, who is therefore not, technically speaking, an heir of the promises God made to his chosen people, Israel.

The second canon shot is this: "But he did not answer her a word." Jesus acts as if she doesn't even exist. He doesn't even give her the satisfaction of covering his ears and saying, "I can't hear you!"—which would at least indicate that he noticed her. But he acts as if she is not there. A tower of lesser strength would have already crumbled to the ground after just these two shots.

But more are fired. The third canon shot is that not only does Jesus ignore her, but Jesus's disciples get annoyed with her cries and pleas. Imagine that you were not a member of any church, but you heard positive things about churches and you heard that they helped people, and you genuinely needed help. So you showed up at Trinity on a Sunday morning. But when you went into my office before church to tell me about your need, I just kept on working at my desk without even looking at you, and then got up and walked right past you and went to talk to some other member of Trinity. And when you went out into the hallway to follow me, you saw everyone shooting angry and annoyed looks at you. I don't know about you, but I'd be gone. I'd say, "Everything I heard about churches is dead wrong." We wouldn't be surprised if that's what this woman was thinking too: "Everything I've heard about this man and his disciples is untrue. He's not merciful or compassionate. He doesn't listen to people."

But here's the thing: At least the disciples' annoyance got them to intercede for her. That's kind of lost in most English translations. In most English translations, it sounds like the disciples are just telling Jesus to tell her to scram. But that's not really what they are saying. It's a dense expression, and if we were to paraphrase what they are saying, it would go something like, "Jesus, just do what she wants, so that we don't have to listen to her anymore." The disciples, ironically, kind of end up playing the part of the unjust judge in a parable Jesus had told earlier. He had told a parable of a judge who neither feared God nor cared about people, but this woman kept pleading and pleading with him to give her justice, so he finally listened to her simply to get her off his back. That's basically what the disciples are doing here. "Just satisfy her request, Jesus. Then she'll leave and we'll finally have some peace."

But instead, we get cannon shot number four. "He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.'" Can you even imagine this scene? The woman is still standing right there! Jesus is not only still refusing to acknowledge her; he's also rebuking his own disciples, in her presence, for entreating him on her behalf: "Don't you guys know anything about my mission? I wasn't sent for her kind."

If you were a tower and had these four cannon shots fired at you, would you still be standing?

Even Jesus's own disciples gave up at this point. Their one attempt didn't work, so they're done. But the woman wasn't even close to giving up. Martin Luther says, "Four great cannon shots have been fired at her, and she has simply swallowed them down." She now comes and kneels right in front of Jesus, where he cannot ignore her.

To get the full effect of this, remember what the disciples said earlier: "She keeps crying out after us." Mark tells us about a house Jesus was staying in. So what are we to imagine? Did she show up at the house, and as soon as the door was open, she got her foot in, and then followed them around from one room to another? Or had they been out and about in the streets, and the woman found them and followed them there, and now they disappeared into the house, and the woman shrugged her shoulders and barged right in? What a shamelessly bold woman!

But there's one more cannon shot, and it's the strongest one yet. She comes and kneels in front of him, and we can just imagine her on her knees, clasping her hands and looking up into his face: "Lord, help me." And Jesus finally looks at her, and he finally speaks to her, and this is what he says: "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs." In other words, "I came for the lost sheep of Israel. They are my children, not you gentiles. What I have is spread on the table for them, not you gentiles. You gentiles are just house pets beneath the table."

Luther said, "If he had said this to me, I would have run right out the door." Perhaps the only thing we Americans would add—since we don't take kindly to insults—is that we might have some choice words as we left.

But the woman doesn't even blink. She is so completely persuaded that Jesus is good and wants to help her and is so completely confident that he can help her and is so completely immersed in his words that, far from being scared off or offended, she sees a wide open door.

"Right, Lord," she said. "After all, the little dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." And as she looks up at him, kneeling there on the floor, you can almost imagine her happily playing the part of the dog, looking up at him like a dog beneath the table during dinner, as if to say, "So, since you've granted that I'm a dog sitting beneath your lavishly spread table, I'm waiting for you to brush those crumbs off."

What else can Jesus do? What else can he say? She has swallowed every cannon shot. She has persisted without hesitation. And now she has trapped him in his own words, and it is a trap into which Jesus has gladly fallen. I imagine him breaking into a smile at her and also raising his eyebrows at his disciples as if to say, "Huh? How about *that*?" And then he looks back at the woman, "Woman, you have great faith. It will be done for you, just as you desire." It's almost as if she and Jesus were in on a little game together, even though they hadn't talked about it or arranged it at all beforehand. For a person with a faith like this woman's, cannon shots fired from God *are* a game, because a person like that is convinced that, no matter what the appearance, God is merciful, good, and kind and wants to help, especially when the request is a just one. This woman was not asking for riches for herself. She praying on behalf of her daughter, that she would no longer be terrorized by God's greatest enemy. She knew Jesus wanted to help her, no matter what his reaction.

This is the same faith Abraham had when he kept on pleading for any righteous people that might be living in Sodom and Gomorrah. This is the same faith Joseph maintained when he was sold by his brothers into slavery and then put into prison for a number of years under false accusations, and later told his brothers, "You intended it to harm me, but God intended it for

good." This is the same faith David had when he was given the choice of suffering from famine, war, or plague, and he chose plague because wanted to be directly at the disposal of the merciful God. This is the same faith Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had, when they refused to worship Nebuchadnezzar's image of gold, even though they were threatened with death in a blazing furnace. This is the same faith that Peter and John had when they continued preaching the gospel after they were thrown into prison for it, the same faith Paul had when he continued preaching after he was nearly stoned to death for it. This is the same faith Martin Luther had when he finally left the Wartburg Castle, where his prince was trying to protect him, and he told the prince, "I am able to better protect you than you are me, because of my faith in the Lord."

This is the same faith Job had when he said, "Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him."

Does it ever seem to you as if God is the enemy? Then learn from this gentile woman, learn even more from God's Son hanging on the cross for your sins, that it always only *seems* that way. Keep chasing after him, keep swallowing his cannon shots, keep knocking his door down for his grace, keep trapping him in his own words, and you will always find his gracious help in the end.

He lives to grant you rich supply;
he lives to guide you with his eye.
He lives to comfort you when faint;
he lives to hear your soul's complaint.

He lives to silence all your fears;
he lives to wipe away your tears.
He lives to calm your troubled heart;
he lives all blessings to impart. Amen.