

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

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TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

Our Scripture passage for this Sunday comes from the Gospel of Matthew 15:21–28. In this reading, we hear of Jesus encountering the Canaanite woman who seeks her daughter’s healing. The discourse between Jesus and the woman may strike us as awkward and even offensive. However, at the end of the passage, the Lord proclaims her to be a person of “great faith”. This is a distinction our Lord rarely gives, and we should pay close attention to this passage because it is an instruction for us in how we can be people of great faith as well.

It is interesting to note that sickness provided the motivation for the woman’s encounter with Jesus. We may not often think about it, but sometimes in our lives it is a moment of tragedy or need that brings us to prayer as well. Every situation in life is an opportunity for prayer. The woman could have stayed at home and fostered anger and resentment at God for her daughter’s affliction, but she didn’t. Instead, she did something. She actively sought out Jesus and brought her request for healing before Him. The Lord wants us to see in our moments of distress an invitation to prayer and deepened relationship as well. When Jesus was in distress in the Garden of Gethsemane, He prayed to the Father, and in doing so, He gave us a model of faith to follow. There are various forms of prayer: praise, thanksgiving, adoration, intercession, expiation (seeking forgiveness), and petition. They can be communal (Liturgical) or personal. Different forms of prayer are appropriate for different moments in our lives, but some form of prayer is appropriate for every moment in our lives. Note, too, that the woman’s request actually leads to a conversation (relationship) with Jesus in which both parties speak and both parties are changed by their exchange. The word “conversation” implies the “conversion” of those who participate and is different from a monologue, in which only one person speaks, or a debate in which two people speak, but neither is changed by the interaction. In order for prayer to be a true conversation that is the means of our conversion, we must participate by both our speaking and our listening. In fact, it is the act of listening that is often more important and powerful than the act of speaking. This insight has much to say about the way disciples pray.

What need do you currently have that the Lord is waiting for you to bring to prayer?

Which form of prayer do you practice the least?

Which form of prayer do you practice the most? What changed in the woman through this conversation of praying faith?

What do you think changed in Jesus through this conversation of praying faith (if anything)?

When you pray, is it a monologue, a debate, or a conversation?

In your prayer, do you attempt to change God’s mind or pray for God’s will to be done?

When do you find it most difficult to pray for God’s will to be done?

Next in the conversation with the woman, Jesus stresses that His mission is primarily to the lost sheep of the House of Israel as opposed to the Gentiles represented by the Canaanite woman. He then makes a striking statement when He says, “It is not right to take the food of children and give it to the dogs.” That statement probably disturbs us because it appears to be a callous, indifferent and even insulting comment. There is another way to understand it, however, and this alternate interpretation helps to unlock the faith significance of this exchange. The word that Jesus uses for “dog” (Greek *kynarion*) refers more to a “puppy” or “household dog” in Gentile cultures as opposed to a wild or stray animal. Thus, Jesus is acknowledging that the woman is related to the House of Israel in some way but that His mission is first to the children of that house. Our Lord has given her a place in the House of Israel similar to that of the household pet. It is remarkable that the woman actually accepts whatever place the Lord gives her so long

as she can be related to His ministry and a member of His household. She then reminds the Lord that even the household dogs are fed from the scraps that fall from the table of the children. It is helpful to remember that in the verses immediately preceding this passage (Mt 15:1–20), Jesus’ teaching and example were offered to the House of Israel but not accepted by the Pharisees. This means that the “food” (ministry) already offered to the children was not being eaten and was even being discarded. This is why the woman can now ask for the leftovers of our Lord’s grace and favor. Jesus praised her response as an act of great faith. Sometimes it takes great faith for us to accept the place in life the Lord assigns for us. Sometimes we want to occupy a privileged place in God’s plan rather than to accept a humble role. It is remarkable that the woman was happy to accept whatever place the Lord assigns to her so long as she could be recognized as part of God’s plan. It is within her role in God’s plan (the household dog) that she perseveres in her petition for God’s blessing, her trust in God’s goodness, and her faith in Jesus’ power to heal her daughter. In this conversation, then, Jesus is acknowledging a place for Gentiles in God’s plan of salvation.

Who do we consider to be “outsiders” to God’s grace today?

Who petitions you for your time, energy, or resources without a right for such a request?

What are the scraps that fall from the table of your time, talent, and treasure that can help others?

When have you felt like God has not given you the place in life you want?

What qualities does a person need in order to faithfully and joyfully accept the place in life God gives them?

How would you have responded to Jesus’ words if you were the Canaanite woman?

Why do you think the Canaanite woman persevered in her conversation?

The woman in the story had no right to God’s grace and favor, but she sought it with perseverance and faith nonetheless. What makes us think we deserve God’s grace and favor?

When Jesus proclaims the woman as having “great faith”, we should realize that He is holding her up as an example for us to follow. You see, she stands in stark contrast to Peter who was identified as having “little faith” just a few verses before in Matthew 14:31. Peter showed his little faith by doubting the presence of God in the midst of his trial. The Canaanite woman showed great faith by her persistent struggle in prayer and her unwavering confidence in Jesus’ ability to heal her daughter. Peter showed his little faith by questioning the reality of Jesus. The Canaanite woman showed her great faith by confessing Jesus with the title “Son of David”. Peter was concerned for himself and his own safety. The Canaanite woman approached the Lord on behalf of her daughter and sought the wellbeing of another. Even in the face of seeming rejection, she continued to seek the Lord’s grace and favor. Indeed, her faith was great, and based on that faith, Jesus granted her daughter’s healing. As disciples, we are called to be like the Canaanite woman and come to the Lord day and night with petitions for those in need. So many situations in our world today require our prayers, and sometimes people have no one to pray for them except us. God wants us to acknowledge our need for Him and our dependence on Him; prayer is one important way in which we profess our faith in God and our love for others.

Whom do you pray for?

When do you pray for those who have no one else to pray for them?

When have you stopped praying for a particular need, and why?

Who has prayed for you in a time of need?

How has your prayer been an expression of your faith in God and your love for others?

Who do you refuse to pray for?

It’s interesting that the woman approached Jesus not for her own need but for that of another (her daughter). Why do you think faith becomes great when we look out for others’ needs and not just our own?

Prayer for Unity of Will with God (St. Louise de Marillac)

*O God, my spiritual and corporal existence is Yours since You are my Creator.
But my will is mine because You have created it as free and want it to remain such.
However, I am free to offer it in homage to You
and to make it a sacrifice of praise and honor to You.
Hence, I give my will entirely to You, so that it no longer belongs to me.
Henceforth, I must be careful to let nothing proceed from my heart
that would be unworthy of You.
I must exert constant vigilance over my will
to avoid taking away from You what is truly Yours.*

Amen.