

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“He Did Not Answer Her a Word”

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“And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’ But he did not answer her a word” (Mt. 15:22-23a).

She had come to Him for help. She was crying out for mercy. Not for herself, she came on behalf of her daughter.

She’s a Canaanite, which means she’s a descendent of those persistent and insidious enemies of Israel. She’s also desperate. She has a very sick little girl at home, whom, she says, “is severely oppressed by a demon.” Clearly, she has heard of Jesus. Someone has told her of His reputation for healing and of the messianic expectations on Him. So, she addresses Him rightly: “Lord, Son of David, have mercy!” It’s a heartfelt prayer, but how does Jesus respond? Verse 23, “He did not answer her a word.”

The disciples are not of much help, either. “Send her away” they tell Him. She’s a nuisance, what with her loud, shrill voice and all that crying and begging. “Send her away.”

We must take seriously that Jesus “did not answer her a word.” We take it seriously because it is in the text, but also because it’s the experience of so many of us. There were times for you when Jesus “did not answer [you] a word.” All you heard in return for your prayers was silence, and there’s a certain hopelessness in that silence. I know that personally. Two-thirds of the way through our thirty-year marriage, my wife was diagnosed with cancer. In the words of the psalmist, she was “my hearts delight.” At times, the silence from God was hard to take.

But even more so for this woman, because Jesus was right there, in front of her. She was hoping for healing for her daughter. But before that, she was hoping for some kind of response from Jesus . . . maybe a question or two, or a word of compassion, or a simple “yes,” “no,” or “later,” an acknowledgment of her presence. But “he answered her not a word.”

We’ve heard that silence. When I say my prayers at night, God does not talk back to me. The author of Psalm 22 was familiar with God’s silence. “Oh my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer, and by night, but I find no rest” (Ps. 22:2). Last week, we talked of Job, who, for 37 chapters cried out to God for answers, and for 37 chapters, the only thing he heard from God was stone cold silence.

Eventually in this text, the silence *is* broken, but not by Jesus. It’s broken by the persistent faith of this woman. Verse 25, “She came and knelt before him, saying, ‘Lord, help me.’” Notice her posture. She’s on her knees before him. She recognizes her lack of standing. She does not think of herself more highly than she ought. She identifies herself as a beggar.

Finally, he answers her, but it’s not the answer she was hoping for. “It’s not right” Jesus says, “to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

Maybe you and I have prayed and prayed and prayed to God and felt like we were yelling into a black hole. No response. No answers. No comfort. Just silence. You and I, however, have never experienced the ugly brushoff this woman did. That’s something worse than silence, right? It surprises me every time I read it.

Whatever’s wrong with Him? What’s gotten under His skin? With others . . . even other Gentiles, He was so gracious and generous, reckless even with his healing miracles. Why so stingy and cold with this poor Canaanite woman? What has she done to deserve this?

But she also surprises us. She hangs in there. Even this insult, this slur doesn’t thwart her. She matches His obstinacy with her own. She does not quit, even when He’s abrasive and rude. She knows she’s a beggar. She also knows He has bread to give.

Do you know that? Do you know you're a beggar? Do you know before God you have no standing? No standing based on who you are or what you've done, what you've accomplished. No standing based on your customary kindness. No standing based on your generosity. No status based on your race or your sex or your age or your attractiveness or your intelligence or your leadership in the church. No prestige based on coming from a long line of Lutherans with church workers sprinkled throughout the family tree. Do you know that you too are a dog begging before Jesus with nothing to point to, nothing to offer?

And do you know that He has bread . . . bread to spare for begging dogs? It's the Bread of Life, bread that has come down from heaven. Do you know that if you eat of that bread you will live forever? Do you know that the bread that He gives for the life of the world is His flesh? (Jn. 6:51-52). Incarnate flesh. Crucified and resurrected flesh. Flesh in and under the bread.

So, make like this Canaanite woman and cry out for mercy: "Lord, help me!" Don't say it just once and call it a day. Make like this Canaanite woman and be stubborn about it; nag the Lord Jesus. Pester Him. He invites that in the Parable of the Persistent Widow (Lk. 18:1-8).

Don't let His silence deter you. Make like this Canaanite woman. She digs in her heels, swallows her pride, and says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She holds Him to His words and His character. The Lord loves it when we do that. That's the right stuff. That's what He was waiting for and aiming for: unreserved faith and confidence in him, without any sense of entitlement. "O woman" He says, "great is your faith! Your request is granted." And at that very moment her little girl was healed.

Jesus gives this woman exactly what she wants. With His silence, He also stretches her faith, confirms it, strengthens it, and focuses it squarely on Him. And when He says, "great is your faith" He's lifting her up as a model of faith for us. Her faith is tenacious and humble, without a shred of self-righteousness. With dogged persistence she holds Him to His words and to His character. She shows us what it means to live by faith, not by sight.

The promise is not that Jesus will be forced to give us what we want if only we ask in the right way. Sometimes He will, and when He does, we should shout out His praises from the mountaintops. But in many cases, we are stuck with the silence, and in the silence, it's just as important to keep the faith. For remember, our story is not yet finished. He has not yet said to us as he did to this woman, "Be it done for you as you desire." But He will. When Jesus returns, God's silence will be broken by the trumpet blast, and His apparent absence will be replaced by His glorious presence. Then we will know the fullness of His mercy. Then we will know the fullness of His compassion and love, the fullness of His power to make things right again.

Then we will know the warm welcome He has for all beggars, and the banquet He has prepared for us, not crumbs from the table, but an unending feast of rich things. No more crying or sighing or dying, no more darkness or loneliness or emptiness. No more silence.

Like he did for this Canaanite woman and her daughter, He will bring full and eternal healing to you and me.

In the meantime, we live in faith and prayer, trusting in His mercy. Such is how it goes for those who live by faith alone. Amen.