

September 5, 2021

Mark 7:24-30

“Faith that Won’t Take ‘No’ for an Answer!”

Pilgrim Lutheran Church
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Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In our text for this morning we have a Gentile woman begging and arguing with Jesus. She wins the argument. One can say that the sinless Son of God causes a sinless argument for a very righteous reason. Jesus must work with the woman in our text in a very strange way as he must frequently work with us because we are still sinful human beings. Trust must be strengthened. Our faith needs to be exercised. If it is not exercised it will grow weak and finally die. Jesus is aiming to create in her and in us a **Faith that Won't Take "No" for an Answer!**

We have to be a little bit careful with that statement. Our sinful natures are always twisting the truths of Scripture. This statement does NOT mean that we have the right in every circumstance to say "No" to Jesus thinking that we will get our way; especially, when our sinful desires are in the mix. Jesus often says "No" to us and we are bid to accept that with rejoicing. On the other hand, when we have a sure and certain promise that flows from who Jesus is and what he has done for our spiritual well-being we may say "No" to his "No."

In the past I have mentioned Luther's understanding of this by using various illustrations. We often strengthen relationships with our children and grandchildren by a little game we play. When children are young we might give to them a gift that we then hold up out of their reach. They jump and grab and might even try to climb us to get to it. Sometimes they break down into tears rather quickly. Hopefully, before hard feelings set in we give back to them the gift teaching them to trust us even when it appears that we have removed the gift from them. The game ends when they have us figured out. The child no longer jumps and grabs and climbs. They just kind a look at you and wait. In that moment, they are saying "No" to your "No" because they believe that you are not going to deny them what you have so freely given.

With Jesus, who must work with us in strange ways, the game can get more complex and painful as we grow older in the faith. In our gospel lesson we are confronted with a Gentile woman. She is of the people who were supposed to have been wiped out long ago when the Israelites entered into the promised land. Remarkably, she believes in Jesus. This points us to the fact that salvation is not just for the Jewish people. What Jesus is initially keeping out of her reach is the well-being of her daughter. Is there anything more desperate for a mother than the well being of her child? Her daughter is possessed by a demon. This mother is helpless. One might even so dare to say that this moment is not a time for "games."

But Jesus plays a "game." Really it is not a game at all. It is about faith and its strengthening. It is about what Jesus does for our salvation. She begs him to cast out the demon. Mark records, "And he [Jesus] said to her, 'Let the children be fed first, for it is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'" Two things here. First, there is a glimmer of promise in the words of Jesus that if the children are fed first then maybe there will be bread for those who do not sit at the table as the children do. Second, it was obviously no compliment that he called her a dog. For the most part, dogs were considered scavengers who lived on garbage of every kind. A proper spiritual understanding of the statement of Jesus comes to us from the words of the apostle John in Revelation 22:15, "Outside are the dogs ... everyone who loves and practices falsehood."

Interestingly, the woman does not argue for or against being a dog. She just accepts the term. However, she contends that the crumbs can be given to those who are not sitting at the table. In other words, she trusts that Jesus is not just for the children at the table, but that he makes children even out of dogs. Such can eat too, even if they are just the crumbs. In other words, she believes that everything that Jesus holds out of her grasp is, in fact, for her. This is her “No” to Jesus’ “No.” We learn that dogs can be made into children by faith in the Savior who forgives sins. The bread from the table is hers by faith, and on account of this argument, Mark records that Jesus says to her, “‘... go your way; the demon has left your daughter.’ And she went home and found the child lying in bed and the demon gone.” This is **Faith that Won’t Take “No” for an Answer!** She eats of the bread who is Jesus her Savior.

When Jesus does this sort of thing in our lives, it is so that he may grow our faith into a faith that will persevere. It becomes a faith that holds on to Jesus no matter what. It becomes a faith that holds on to life and salvation even the midst of death. If the woman of our text had not been a child of God she would have given up and walked away from the whole situation. But she holds on to the one that she believes is her Savior. In the face of being numbered with the dogs she holds onto the glimmer of the promise of Jesus.

Jesus grows and strengthens her faith into a faith that is so strong that it will not let go even in those moments when he appears as if he is an enemy. What a wonderful gift for her and for all of us. Here we learn to embrace every moment when it appears that Jesus is not our friend knowing and believing that He really loves us. He is teaching us dogs to look for the food from his hand even when it seems that the last thing he will do is give us something from his table. Jesus gives us himself. This is really amazing because none of us deserve it.

So today we find ourselves once again at the cross of Jesus. Look at the amazing strength of that promise in the one nailed there! Jesus became flesh to live a perfect life for us. He came to suffer and die for everything that we have done against him and one another. He came to bring the forgiveness of sins. This is the sure and certain promise that we have from which all other promises flow. We are forgiven for all of our sins no matter how great they may be. In that forgiveness we have the hope of being with Jesus forever in eternal love and bliss.

In this life, there are moments when it might appear that Jesus is saying “no” to us in who he is and all that he gives. There may be times when everything from our perspective might appear to be lost when it comes to ourselves and what the future holds. There are times when he calls us “dogs.” But he does this so that we may say “No.” He does this so that we learn to hold on to him all the more much like Jacob who held on to him even when he touched his hip and knocked it out of socket. He does this so that we may go back to his cross and all the more realize that his love is so great for us that he will not forever withhold anything from us. This is expressed in these powerful words that are said of the Father who loved the world and gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life. Paul writes in Romans 8:31-32, “What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?”

Yes! That is the core! This is what we hold onto whenever it seems that we might be neglected dogs at the table. We look at the Father's love for us at the cross and realize that he is always for us! After all, he gave up his very heart. He gave up his one and only Son that we dogs might be fed. If God has given his Son, and his one and only Son has given himself, is there any promise of God that will be forgotten? Never! Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 1:18-20, "As surely as God is faithful, our word to you has not been Yes and No. For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we proclaimed among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No, but *in him it is always Yes*. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory."

Regarding the woman in our gospel lesson for today, Luther remarks in a sermon that there are times in the Christian life when feelings cry out and we are convinced that there is nothing but "No," and yet that is not true. He writes:

Therefore it must turn from this feeling and lay hold of and retain the deep spiritual yes under and above the no with a firm faith in God's Word, as this poor woman does, and say God is right in his judgment which he visits upon us; then we have triumphed and caught Christ in his own words. As for example when we feel in our conscience that God rebukes us as sinners and judges us unworthy of the kingdom of heaven, then we experience hell, and we think we are lost forever. Now whoever understands here the actions of this poor woman and catches God in his own judgment, and says: Lord, it is true, I am a sinner and not worthy of your grace; but still you have promised sinners forgiveness, and you have come not to call the righteous, but, as St. Paul says in 1 Tim 1:15, "to save sinners." Behold, then must God according to his own judgment have mercy upon us!

Indeed! May God grant us a **Faith that Won't Take "No" for an Answer!**

Amen.

Pastor Brock Abbott