

“Don’t Take ‘No’ For An Answer”
Matthew 15:21-28
February 28, 2021

I once had an uncle who was an incredible salesman. He could sell you anything (“he could sell you sand in a desert,” as the saying goes). I think what made him so good at selling was his persistence; he just wouldn’t take “no” for an answer.

We see a similar thing on display in today’s Gospel, as a Canaanite woman refuses to take “no” for an answer from Jesus. What we learn from that is that that’s what God wants from us: to not accept anything other than a “yes” from Him, in His Son. God wants us, from Him, to NOT take “no” for an answer. To that we now turn our attention ...

As we do, we return to today’s Gospel and hear again that:

“Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.” (Matthew 15:21)

The place that Jesus left there was the region of Galilee, in the northern part of what we today refer to as the “Holy Land.” Jesus had been making His way throughout the various towns and villages around the Sea of Galilee when He encountered opposition from those leaders of Israel known as the Pharisees. The region of Tyre and Sidon was north and west of Galilee, with those two towns lying on the banks of the Mediterranean Sea. Though Galilee was certainly a Gentile region, the region of Tyre and Sidon was *even more* so, as it had once served as home for some of Israel’s enemies in the O.T. When Jesus withdrew from His confrontation with the Pharisees to the region of Tyre and Sidon, it seemed that He was withdrawing *away* from His ministry to Israel to minister *to her enemies*.

But as we will soon see, Jesus did not withdraw too far from Israel, as He seemed to deny a request for healing on the part of a Gentile on the grounds that He was sent to minister to Israel. The story goes as follows:

“... 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.’” (v.22)

Matthew says that Jesus:

“... did not answer her a word.” (v.23a)

Evidently the woman kept on shouting for Jesus’ help, though, because the disciples then said to Jesus:

“Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” (v.23b)

And Jesus again rebuffed her, saying to the disciples:

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” (v.24)

The woman, however, refused to take “no” for an answer, as she again said to Jesus:

“Lord, help me.” (v.25)

And Jesus again rebuffed her, saying:

“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (v.26)

Then the woman responded, incredibly, by *agreeing* with what Jesus said, herself saying:

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (v.27)

Jesus said to her:

“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” (v.28a)

And Matthew then tells us that her daughter was healed “instantly.” Her daughter was healed instantly because the woman refused to take “no” for an answer from Jesus. In the end, *she got a “yes.”*

There are some things we want to take note of in this text ...

- First of all, it is unclear as to why Jesus repeatedly rebuffs the woman like He does. One could say He’s simply teaching the importance of persistent faith – and that *is* the point of the text (as well as today’s O.T. Lesson), when you get down to it. But that also seems a ‘bit harsh, in terms of how the whole affair would’ve been experienced by the woman. All we can really say is that Jesus said what He said and did what He did for His own reasons, and in the end His encounter with the Canaanite woman *does* teach the importance of *persistent* faith – a faith that stands in contrast to that of the leaders of God’s people: Israel (see the Pharisees).

- Also, notice what Jesus says in v.24:

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Those words tell us that Jesus’ mission *was*, first of all, for the people of Israel – which the woman herself seemed to understand, given her final comment to Jesus. Especially in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus is portrayed as the “*new* Israel,” the One Who not only fulfills God’s promises to His people ‘of old,’ but Who Himself meets God’s expectations for those people, being *on their behalf* the people of God they failed to be (remember last week). Though Jesus’ ministry ends up being for the whole world, God *had* promised to work *through* His people: Israel, to save the world (remember the promise to Abraham that in his descendants *all the world* would be blessed). To save the world meant first to save Israel, and that was what Jesus was sent to do (as Matthew makes clear in the very first chapter of his Gospel – v. 21, where he says that Jesus would “save His people from their sins”).

- Note also *how* Jesus speaks to the woman. He calls her a dog!, saying, again:

“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” (v.26)

Then again, in Jesus’ day Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles as dogs. In referring to this Gentile woman as a dog, Jesus spoke in a way that would’ve been understood, both by His disciples as well as by the woman.

God takes care of dogs. He takes care of all. We see that throughout the rest of Matthew’s Gospel, as Jesus ends up dying on a cross for the sins of the world, Jew and Gentile alike. On that cross the Heavenly Father said “no” to His one and only Son to say “yes” to all who believe in Him. The woman believed that, so she said:

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (v.27)

Even the dogs eat of what God gives and have enough. Even the dogs have a God Who cares for them.

Folks, I’m sure there have been times in your life when it *seemed* as though God did NOT care; I mean, we don’t always get what we want in life. But whenever God says “no” to something, it’s only because He has something *better* in mind for us. The struggle of faith is the struggle to believe there’s a “yes” hidden within the “no”; it’s the struggle to receive from God, and even demand that He give to us, *even when He turns away!* Christian faith sees all of God’s promises as “yes” in Jesus, and so it refuses to take “no” for an answer.

Last week we said that being a Christian is easy. This week we get a qualifier to that as today’s Gospel (as well as O.T. Lesson) teach us about the importance of being persistent with God. Persistence isn’t easy; it’s difficult to keep asking someone for something when all they seem to be saying is “no.” And it’s no easier with God. But that’s what the persistence of faith does – it keeps asking of God, even when He appears intent on saying “no.”

When that happens to you, remember today’s Gospel and, like the Canaanite woman, refuse to take “no” for an answer from God. When you get a “no,” look for something else that He’s saying “yes” to. And by all means, keep coming to church, so that you can receive the most important “yes” of all: God’s “yes” to you of forgiveness, eternal life and salvation in His Son. Above all remember that “yes” will one day be the *only* thing you hear from God, on the Day of His Son’s glorious return. Until that Day, go out into the world and share God’s “yes” with others –

– In Jesus’ ✠ Name,
Amen!