

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

The last three weeks we have ear-witnessed some of Jesus' signs and wonders, signs that bear witness to Jesus' divinity. Two weeks ago, in service to His divine compassion Jesus healed the sick and fed the multitudes. Last week, Jesus showed His power over creation by walking on the water and enabling Peter to walk on it, too. And this week, we witnessed another display of divine power. Jesus healed a girl from afar, a girl who was possessed by a demon.

He healed her instantly, our translation has it. And yet, it didn't seem so instantly as we heard in the Gospel. Actually, the text says "*from that hour,*" which I like better. From what hour? From the moment that Jesus assented to her prayer. "*Be it done for you as you desire.*" "*And her daughter was healed from that hour*" (my translation).

This is the path I want to take us down with this text. I'm going to talk a bit about prayer. In fact, prayer is a part of each of these Gospel texts we've been pondering over the last weeks.

You recall two weeks ago that Jesus had heard about the brutal slaying of John the Baptist. He wanted to be alone; He tried to withdraw to a deserted place; He wanted to pray.

Remember also, we heard how the people didn't let Him. They brought their sick to Him so that He might heal them. Surely the people entreated Jesus to heal their loved ones. And Jesus did.

Next came the prayer of the disciples: "*send the crowds away to go into the villages and buy food for themselves*" (Matt. 14:15). Jesus heard their prayer but didn't answer it as they had hoped. He had something else in mind. Rather than grant the disciples' prayer, He fed the people without their prayer. He took the five loaves and two fish the disciples had and fed the people, multiplying the provisions until everyone was full.

This is often how prayer works. The disciples asked, but Jesus, who gives "*far more abundantly than all that we ask or think*" (Eph. 3:20), provided for the people instead of sending them away. Did the multitude ask to be fed? I doubt it. They hadn't followed Jesus for that purpose. Jesus just did it. That's also God's way as Luther explains in the Small Catechism about the 4th Petition: "God certainly gives daily bread to everyone without our prayers, even to all evil people."

I don't presume to judge whether the people who had flocked after Jesus were good or bad, believers or unbelievers. The fact is, Jesus granted them their daily bread without their asking — thanks be to God. And thanks be to God that He supplies us with these things that have "to do with the support and needs of [our

bodies], such as food, drink, clothing, shoes, house, home, land, animals, money, goods, a devout husband or wife, devout children,” and so forth, and so on, without our specifically asking for them. We pray, “Lord, help us to realize this, and to receive our daily bread with thanksgiving” (Small Catechism, Lord’s Prayer, 4th Petition).

In last week’s Gospel, prayer again was front and center. Jesus was finally able to go off by Himself to pray. Hopefully, Jesus’ example can encourage us in our prayers, for if God’s eternal Son needed to pray, surely we need it even more. God grant that we may heed Jesus command and invitation to pray in every need.

But then Jesus journeyed across the water on foot to meet the disciples as they labored against the strong headwinds. You recall how they saw Jesus and thought He was a ghost. They cried out in fear! Here, the disciples’ prayer may not be so recognizable, but their cries of fear were much like the groanings that the Holy Spirit uses to intercede for us (Rom. 8:26). Jesus answered this prayer with His encouraging words, *“Take heart; it is I. Do not be afraid”* (Matt. 14:27).

Peter continued the prayers. Though filled with some doubt, he asked Jesus for a miracle: to let him walk on the water, too. And Jesus answered it: *“Come”* (Matt. 14:29). We must remember, this miracle was not done on the strength of Peter’s faith, but on the power of God. In fact, Peter’s *“little faith”* became evident as the wind blew against him. He doubted and became afraid. *“Lord, save me,”* he prayed urgently as he sank into the sea. Jesus answered his prayer. He reached out a hand and lifted Peter into the boat.

Which brings us to our Gospel for today. Jesus made His way to the region of Tyre and Sidon, on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. It was the land of the Syro-Phoenicians, the Canaanites. Those living there were not Jews; they weren’t even Samaritans, with roots reaching back to the patriarch Joseph.

These Canaanites weren’t believers looking for a promised savior from the loins of Abraham by whom *“all the families of the earth shall be blessed”* (Gen. 12:3). They had no fleshly connection to King David, no promised *“offspring after [David], who [would] come from [his] body, and”* in whom God would *“establish the throne of his kingdom forever”* (2 Sam. 7:12-13). They had no promise of a Messiah to give them hope.

What a surprise, therefore, when Jesus upon arrival was met by a Canaanite woman and her prayer! *“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.”* Clearly, she knew who Jesus was. She called Him *“Lord”*; she called Him *“Son of David.”* Could it be that this foreigner loved *“the name of the LORD”*? Had she joined herself *“to the LORD”* *“to be his servant”*? The Lord had promised: *“these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them*

joyful in my house of prayer; ... my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” Yes, even for the Gentiles like this Canaanite woman.

More surprising, perhaps, is Jesus’ response. He seems to ignore her prayer. His response is silence. Silence in answer to prayer challenges us; it challenges our faith. Does God hear? Does God care? Why won’t God do something? Why does God let us or our loved ones suffer so? His silence seems to drain our faith away.

As I think about this, I can’t help but think about the movie, “Silence.” I referenced it some years back in talking about confessing the faith. In the movie, Father Rodrigues apostatized — he renounced the faith publicly, though privately he believed to the end. But he could never speak of the faith — that was part of the silence he was forced to endure ... his own. But before he came to that point, Father Rodrigues prayed fervently to God to relieve the suffering of the persecuted Japanese Christians and spare them. But Rodrigues’ prayer was met with silence ... God’s silence ... and that silence tortured him.

Therefore, we pray, “Lord, strengthen our faith in the face of silence. Give us faith like this Canaanite woman,” for she was not deterred. She continued to pray ... urgently ... insistently. Annoyed by her bleating, the disciples begged — that’s also a prayer: “*Send her away, for she is crying out after us.*” They really wanted Jesus to do what she was asking, then send her away, so she would leave them alone. He did not. The woman’s prayer went unanswered, and so did the disciples’. “*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*”

Oh, did Jesus not come for her, too? Or have you thought similarly? Jesus didn’t come for someone like you? We know He did. The good news of the coming of the Christ was “*for all the people*” (Luke 2:10). He was born for you! The only Son of the Father was given to the world as an atoning sacrifice, not just for some. To be sure, Jesus’ ministry as He walked about Galilee and Judea was primarily to the “*lost sheep,*” but not exclusively. Jesus healed the servant of the Roman Centurion, for example (Matt 8:5-13). But though Jesus was sent primarily to “*the lost sheep,*” the disciples were sent to preach the good news “*to the end of the earth*” (Acts 1:8), and Paul was appointed the “*apostle to the Gentiles.*” Luke recorded this statement by Paul: “*let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles*” (Acts 28:28).

Rightly, therefore, this Gentile woman was undeterred by Jesus’ rebuff, and neither should our prayers falter because we think we’re not of the right family, group, or status. Jesus came for us. Believe, as this woman did, and pray.

The woman finally knelt down before Jesus and pleaded, “*Lord, help me.*” This time Jesus responded: “*It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.*” Was she so unworthy ... unworthy to receive the intervention of

Jesus? Her own answer was “*Yes, Lord.*” She understood. She was unworthy ... undeserving. The Gentile centurion mentioned earlier made a similar confession: “*Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof*” (Matt. 8:8).

And don't we say the same? As Luther explains in the 5th Petition of the Lord's Prayer: “We pray in this petition that our Father in heaven would not look at our sins, or deny our prayer because of them. **We are neither worthy of the things for which we pray, nor have we deserved them, ... we daily sin much and surely deserve nothing but punishment.**”

This woman didn't deserve Jesus' intervention; she simply trusted that He would show mercy to her, to her daughter, out of His goodness and grace. Again, that's where Luther points us in our prayers — not to trust in ourselves but to trust in God, in His word and promises, trust that God “would give them all to us” — He will answer our prayers — “by grace,” because of who He is, because He is the one who commands us to ask, because He promises to hear and answer our prayers — in abundance!

Jesus commended this woman's faith: “*great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.*” Similarly, He commended the Gentile centurion: “*with no one in Israel have I found such faith. ... Go; let it be done for you as you have believed*” (Matt. 8:10, 13). In mercy, God has granted us faith to believe in Christ Jesus and His blood bought forgiveness for us poor sinners, not because of our prayer, but because of His grace. God grant that we may, like the faithful before us, respond in faithful and fervent prayer. And God grant that “it be done for [us] as [we] believe” (Rite of Individual Confession and Absolution, *Lutheran Service Book*).

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.