

“A Mother’s Request”

All in the Family, part #4

Matthew 15:21-28

Happy Mother’s Day to all. It is important to recognize and honor our mothers. Even if you are not a mother, you had one. So, in a way, this day is for everyone.

We have been working through a sermon series called “All in the Family.” God is very concerned about our families. That’s why in the Bible we find examples all the main roles: grandma, grandpa, mom, dad, son, daughter. God sets forth these great examples so that we can shape our families and apply these lessons in our lives.

Today, in honor of Mother’s Day, we of course are going to talk about moms. Has your mother ever said to you, “You’re out of your mind!” Maybe you did something crazy, like gave the dog a chocolate-pudding bath. I used to chase my brother around the house, and we broke my mom’s great aunt Molly’s dishes, the special painted ones. It drove her crazy.

When my wife, Katja, was four years old, her mom was helping her blow her nose one day. Katja blew really hard, and out popped a clay marble. My mother-in-law asked, “What is this?” Katja said she was playing with it a few days ago, and she got it stuck. Afraid of getting in trouble, she didn’t say anything, figuring, with her childlike-logic, that eventually the marble would make its way into the toilet. From the looks of things, that marble was in her sinuses for about two weeks.

But I found a story online that takes the cake. This is from Vanessa Vazquez on buzzfeed.com:

"My four-year-old son put a dry bean in his ear at preschool. (They were making a craft with them.) He thought he was going to get in trouble once he realized it was stuck, so he didn't tell anyone. A month after school was over he sneezed and said the bean was hurting his ear. I said, 'What bean?!' One pediatrician visit and a referral to an ear, nose, and throat doctor later, the bean was safely removed. My child lived with a bean in his ear, at best guess, for two and a half months."

This is some crazy stuff, but we know that despite our antics, our mothers still love us. And moms go to great lengths for their children. Similar to our story like last week about the dad who walked 18 miles for his son, the woman in our scripture today also traveled to find Jesus, although in this story, it does not say how far.

I have a lot of sympathy for this woman. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. Literally, her child was not in her own right mind. I can understand how much it hurts when my child is sick – physically sick. When our children are ill, we have to get them to the doctor or the hospital. But when a child is spiritually sick, possessed by a demon – how much worse is that? We have psychologists and psychiatrists today, but in Jesus' time, mental illnesses were attributed to demons. And certainly, there were literal demon possessions, too.

So, like the man in last week's story, this mother hears that Jesus is in town and goes to find him, hoping for a miracle. Up to this point, it is starting to sound like a typical Jesus-healing narrative.

But I admit to you, this story is awkward. In fact, there are parts that I find confusing, and somewhat embarrassing. Let me explain.

First of all, who is this woman? Matthew tells us, she was a foreigner, a Canaanite. The Canaanites were the hereditary enemies of Israel. If you go back to Old Testament history, you remember that these people always fought with Israel. They had to be defeated for the Israelites to enter the Promised Land.

You have to understand, the Israelites had a zealous cultural identify. They were fiercely separate. They refused to associate with non-Jews. Not only that, they had strict laws about the separation of men and women. In the temple, for instance, there were separate courts for the “Gentiles” (non-Jews), the women, and the Jewish men. If you didn’t belong to the “right” group, you could only go in so far.

A Canaanite woman does not belong with a respected, Jewish rabbi such as Jesus. She was an outsider, not even a real “believer,” according to the Jews. And I believe that Matthew sets up this story to create tension. What will happen? Here is a woman, yelling at the top of her lungs, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.” It is strange, but her first cry indicates that she must have a least some understanding of Jewish history and religion. To call Jesus “Son of David,” is something that she either picked up somewhere, or learned herself.

The first odd part of this story is that Jesus ignores her. He does not say one single word. No reaction, positive or negative. Just silence.

Well, the disciples are not silent. They are irritated and annoyed. They urge Jesus to send her away. Imagine, frankly, the rudeness of their statement. She must have heard them!

Then Jesus says this cryptic sentence: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” This is one strange conversation taking place. First the woman is ignored,

then they talk over her and around her, but not to her. Then Jesus says something rather aloof.

Still, the woman persists. In fact, she gets right in Jesus face. “Lord, help me!” Direct and to the point. She does not even use “Please, if you can, would you, kind sir?”

Have you ever gotten in God’s face before? Have you ever said, “God, make this happen. God don’t ignore me.” If you have, you are in good company with people like the psalmists, the persistent widow, and the blind beggar.

The next awkward moment comes as Jesus tells her it is not right to take food from the children and give it to their dogs. Be real with me. Does that sound like something you would expect Jesus to say? There is some discussion in commentaries as to whether or not Jesus is calling this woman a dog. Not all scholars are inclined to think this is insulting. Some say, Jesus is referring to household pets. As for me, I am inclined to believe, yes, that was harsh on Jesus’ part.

But maybe Jesus is saying something different. Maybe Jesus is saying, his purpose was to start in Israel. He is focused on his ministry, which would lead to the cross. Maybe there is a pressing need for Jesus in that town, and he cannot delay to follow this woman. Maybe Jesus is testing her, even challenging her. Maybe Jesus does not actually know what she is thinking.

But her next words really blow me away. She offers a graceful, faithful, witty, humble response. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table.”

Jesus is clearly impressed, and he grants her request. He says to her, “Woman, you have great faith!” My commentary told me that in the whole

gospel of Matthew, only this woman heard those words from Jesus. In fact, you might recall that Jesus, in speaking to his own disciples, often told them they had “little faith.” This is a surprise ending for a woman who broke so many taboos to get help for her daughter.

Here is the key point: This woman knew she did not deserve what she was asking for. She knew she was a foreigner, an outsider. Her need was great, but she understood her position. And she went to Jesus anyway. She was humble before him, but persistent. Her daughter meant that much to her.

What about us? When we go to God with a request, what are we really expecting? This woman was content with whatever Jesus was willing to give her. She knew she did not deserve anything from Jesus, but she was willing to go to him. What is our expectation when we go to God?

I am going to say something shocking, but true. God does not have to love us. God does not have to forgive us. God is not required by some cosmic force to be kind and merciful to us. Nobody is standing over God saying, “You better be nice, or else!” God is God.

That is what makes grace so amazing. We really do not deserve the goodness God gives us in Jesus, and that is exactly why it is so good. God is perfectly just and perfectly loving, and God chooses to love us. Remember the liturgy we say at every Holy Communion? “Hear the good news. Christ died for us while we were yet sinners. That proves God’s love toward us. In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven!”

We deserve nothing from Jesus. Not his love, not his compassion, not his mercy, not a miracle. This woman knew that. Yet she was also bold enough to ask for it.

Do you know what faith is? It is asking for what we do not deserve, not demanding that we get it, but being grateful when we do. Faith is being persistent, shouting your needs to God, and yet being content when God does not answer.

Let me tell you what the gospel really is: It is one beggar telling another beggar where to find food. The Gospel story is that God, who created us, loved us, when He did not have to. Our sin broke that relationship God intended for us. We could not make it up to God. There was nothing we could do to save ourselves. But instead of giving up on us, God sent His only Son, Jesus, to save us. Jesus died a horrible death on a cross, suffering at the hands of his own creation, taking on the sin of the world, our sin, so that we could have God's righteousness in return. We could experience that wonderful, loving relationship again with God, if we but just accept his invitation. If you confess your sin, and trust in Jesus alone, you will be saved. And when you discover how good this life is when you walk with Jesus, you start to live in a way that shows others that good news as well.

Would you be content with crumbs? Because the truth is, God has set an entire banquet table of grace for us to receive. And it is because of moms like this Canaanite woman that we can even receive it.

So here is to moms who are willing to take risks for their children. Here is to women who don't have it all together, but know where to find Jesus. If only that we all would have the same persistence, wit, and humility when it comes to faith. May we also come to the same realization of how wonderful the grace is that we have received.

Memory verse

Matthew 15:27 – “...Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” (NIV)

Reflection questions

1. What is something that God gave you that you didn’t expect?
2. Is it fair to say we don’t deserve grace, or that God does not have to love us?
3. Why do you think God loves us?
4. Which character in the story can you best relate to? The woman? The disciples? The crowd watching?