

Sermon on the Canaanite Woman

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. There once was a young man who was called upon to take care of a sick and sometimes very unpleasant dying old man. This young man was inexperienced with such work but sought eagerly to help the elder, always seeking to maintain goodwill and loving concern in his heart for the dying one. One day, at a time when the older man was nearing death, he began to be especially violent with his words, nearly bringing his younger helper to the point of a terrible despair. In a moment of misunderstanding, the elder man began to berate the young lad to the point of painful tears, almost striking him. The younger one fled, feeling that a grave injustice had taken place. After weeping for an hour or so and recovering from the shock, the young man realized that there was no way that he was going to “win.” The injustice was never going to be set aright....the old man needed help and the only way to be able to continue to help him was by asking his forgiveness.

With help from God, the young man came back to the room where the dying man lay and asked for his pardon for what had happened. At this, the elder accepted and told the young boy something that surprised and dazzled him....Peering up while coughing and wheezing, the elder stated: “If you can ask for forgiveness even when you are not at fault, there will always be hope for you.”

Often times in our lives we suffer what seems to be injustices. Whether from the circumstances of our lives, whether it be from other people. We get sick, we suffer, we lose our jobs, we have others who hate us and speak poorly about us (and) this list could go on and on. And, it even may seem that at times, because of an agonizing loss in our lives (of maybe a loved one) that even God Himself is unjust.

In the Gospel today, we hear a wonderful and yet unusual story of a woman from Canaan (she represents in her person those who are not Jewish who would come to Christ.) She explains of a terrible misfortune in her own life: Her daughter was possessed by a demon which is a plight that can only be really understood when someone has actually experienced it. After the Lord heard her, the Gospel amazingly says that “He answered her *NOT A WORD.*”

How many times has this happened to us? We beseech God for help, we tell Him of a terrible sorrow, difficulty, loss, or injustice and, perplexingly, He answers us *NOT A WORD.* The language that God often uses when He speaks to us personally is the language of silence. It is a language that must elicit a particular response from us if we desire to continue our conversation with God: humility and patient perseverance. Often, God allows us a period of waiting to show ourselves and others how we react and what we do in the face of difficulty, for it is only in adversity that virtue will be made manifest. God loves us infinitely and because of this love He makes us wait. We live in a world that is a push button, internet buying, fast paced consumer society which conditions us with sometimes unreasonable expectations. However, as the Lord reminds us He says “My ways are not your ways and my thoughts are not your thoughts (Isaiah 55.)” The way to God, if we really wish to know Him, is down. The word Canaanite literally means “humility.” So, this Canaanite woman, or woman of humility, (an image of going down,) after receiving the silence of the Lord, perseveres in her requests, as an image of faith and constancy, and for it she actually gets a rebuke from the Lord. He says “It is not meet to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs.” And to this she replies, “Yea, Lord, yet even the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters table.”

This dialogue maybe seems to be madness to us and even indignity may arise in our hearts when we read it. However, a very deep spiritual principle is being revealed to us if we wish to grasp hold and take it: This kind of humility is a divine virtue. Humility, St. Silouan says, is the light in which we behold the Unapproachable light which is God.¹ Just like life itself, humility can only be given to us from outside ourselves (usually through humiliation.) Whatever we may encounter in our life, if we can humbly meet it with a certainty that God loves us, that God *wills* our salvation and that somehow He is in control of everything (even the bad stuff) then we will be able to receive that precious gift of humility that enables us to have our prayers answered before God (like the Canaanite woman,) and that makes us strong with His strength, and that will lead us to the Kingdom of heaven. After the woman bows her head in humility at this stunning and unbelievable rebuke, the Lord pronounces her blessed and says “O woman, great is your faith! Be it unto you even as you desire and her daughter was made well.” Christ loved her enough to test her, to humble her, to make her see her own inadequacy in dealing with the issue at hand.

We too, when we are crushed and when it seems that sorrow after sorrow and difficulty after difficulty fall upon us, we must persevere in our dialogue with the Lord. It is only through a humble acceptance of the circumstances of our lives and a willingness to take responsibility for everything that has happened to us: all of our failures, misfortunes, and sorrows; it is only through this that we will be given the strength to overcome them, and through the mercy of God, to grow through them.

We must not nor can we ever despair by thinking that God will abandon us and that He is unmerciful and does not love us. The Christian message is opposite of that of the world: St. Paul tells us that the one whom the Lord loves, he also chastens (Hebrews) (i.e., makes the way tough and rough) in order to bring us to a greater knowledge of ourselves, to a greater likeness of His Son Who is the expressed image of humility, and also for a greater compassion and love for our fellow travelers that suffer similar trials. For, there are two things we must always be certain of: God loves us and He wills our salvation, always granting in our life those things that bring us closer to Him and to salvation.

Injustices will certainly be present in our life. God will speak the great language of silence to us often. However, if we can bow our heads, and persevere in the midst of humiliation, trusting in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord, there will always be hope for us. Indeed, there will always be hope for us if in the midst of seeming injustice we can swallow our pride and take responsibility for it, most often by asking for forgiveness from God and from others (*even if it is not our fault.*) To blame others is the way of the fallen world, but take the blame upon ourselves is the way of Christ that leads us to Life. Indeed, there are no great or more powerful words that we have within our immediate reach that epitomize the unfathomable depth of humility better than these: Forgive me. Let us learn of Christ Who is meek and lowly and we will find rest. Let us bow our head on our own cross and commit our souls into the hands of God and most certainly we will see our own resurrection, today and in the world to come. Amen.

1 St. Silouan the Athonite, 299.