

- God Does Not Let Go

Sunday, August 20, 2023 at The First Congregational Church of Marshalltown, Iowa  
Matthew 15:21-28

- Introduction

Today's passage is one of the more awkward moments in the narrative of Scripture. Jesus and His disciples are in hostile territory and a person keeps bothering them. So much so that Jesus says some things that don't seem polite, and that runs counter to our image of the Lord Jesus, who we envision as someone who is always proper and never says anything out of turn. But that's based on a cursory reading of the passage, and I think another look will show us more to the point of the story. The point being that we need to persevere in prayer. We keep on praying, whether it is for people, loved ones, people in need, prayer for God to intervene, prayer to draw closer. The verse in Hebrews 11:6, which is the very definition of faith, is that God exists and rewards people who seek after Him. There is a "never give up" to prayer that reflects the nature of God. In a funny way, it is the desperate mother who demonstrates the nature of God in this passage.

- Set the stage

In Matthew 15 we find Jesus and the disciples in the region of Tyre and Sidon, which was Gentile territory. This was awkward, because of the long-standing hostility between Gentiles and Jews back in that day. Jews were not always welcome in that setting, and some Gentiles found themselves referred to as "dogs," a studied insult in that day. The Bible does not say why they were there, but apparently a woman in the region confronted Jesus and bothered the disciples. Whether they were just standing there or whether they were walking, and she followed them is not clear. What is clear is that she addressed Him as "Lord" and "Son of David" and begged Him to heal her daughter, sorely troubled by demons. The disciples are irritated by her and want Jesus to send her away, but the Lord does not reply at all at first. Then He said He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel, which is true. Despite some forays into Gentile territory, Jesus spent most of His time with Jewish people in Israel, and Romans 1:16 states that the Gospel is the "power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek (everyone who is not Jewish). So there is something special about Jewish people and about Israel in the plan of God.

- The woman does not give up. She worships Jesus and begs Him to help her and His response, at least on the surface, seems rather rude. He tells her that it is not good to take the children's bread and give it to the dogs. So it seems that she worships Him and begs for help and He calls her a dog. But the word here for "dog" is reserved for little puppies, so imagine cute little puppies instead of filthy, flea-bitten mongrels. She responds that even puppies get to eat the leftovers. Jesus is testing her in order to see that she if she will persevere and when she does, He rewards her. "O women, great is your faith! Let it be to you as your desire. Her daughter was healed.

- Main Point: perseverance in prayer

The main point is that a successful prayer life involves perseverance. In fact, a successful Christian life involves perseverance. You have to be willing to continue even if you feel that nothing is happening and your spiritual life seems to be like trying to swim in a river against the current. There are some things that you must refuse to give up.

recognizes the authority Matthew 8

You bolster your ability to persevere in pray by considering the authority of your Lord. He does have the power to answer, but the timing and nature of the answer may mystify you. In Matthew 8, a few chapters before the encounter with the woman in Tyre and Sidon, Jesus is asked by a Roman soldier to heal his servant. Jesus agrees, but the soldier stops him and tells him that in recognition of Jesus' authority, he seeks only that He gives the order to heal the servant. There is no need to go to him in person. Jesus is shocked, and says that He has not seen such great faith, even in Israel. He give the woman pleading for her daughter a similar complement. Meditating on the great authority of the Lord can help you to persevere. Perseverance was demonstrated by Job who worshipped and complained but never gave up on the Lord. Perseverance was demonstrated by Paul in his zeal for Israel in Romans 11. Despite everything, he was determined that His people would know and that God would find a way. Jesus persevered when He set His face like flint for the joy that was before Him (Matthew and Hebrews). He knew that the cross awaited Him in Jerusalem, yet He persevered and journeyed there knowing what would happen. Hebrews said that He despised the cross for the joy that was set before Him. I believe that the joy set before Him was the generations of people who would call on His name, including you and me. His vision of what was being accomplished helped Him to persevere.

- Application

Here's the application. Determine to persevere. Perseverance means literally “to stay under” as if you were supporting a building. Determine that there will be some matters in prayer about which you will refuse to give up. Just like Isaac when he wrestled with God in that passage, we considered a couple of Sundays ago. Decide that there are some thing or people about whom you will dedicate i prayer and continue as long as you have breath. He has authority. He has power. He has a plan when we have no plan. He knows the future blessing that comes with perseverance. Romans 5:3 tells us that “we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope.” Swimming against the current will strengthen your body. Persevering in prayer will strengthen your character. The word for “character” basically means “test,” as in having passed the test. A person who perseveres is a person who can be trusted.

- Conclusion

Jesus and His disciples left Tyre and Sidon and I don't know if they ever returned. That determined mother went home to find her daughter miraculously healed. We don't know their names or what happened to them afterward. But she persevered. She did not give up. When it comes to seeking God in prayer, we are wise to never give up. When it comes to praying for people, we need to be willing to continue to pray, even if it goes for years. Our Lord is a Lord who actually never lets go, we should not let go either.