

Fourteenth Sunday After Pentecost (A/RCL)  
Matthew 15.10-28  
August 17, 2008  
Holy Trinity, Manasquan

During the Vietnam War there was an American POW named Mike Christian who was detained in the infamous “Hanoi Hilton” prison. Mike had secretly stitched an American flag on the inside of his POW shirt. When his captors found it, they beat him mercilessly, so that his eyes were nearly swollen shut and a number of ribs were broken. The country and the people that flag represents, the principles it stands for, were so important to Mike Christian that while his eyes were still slits from his punishment, he began to stitch that flag again. His passion was so great that he didn’t hesitate to resume the activity that had literally just gotten him kicked in the teeth.

There’s a **first century** woman in today’s Gospel who holds something in common with that **twentieth century** POW. She was passionate for her cause, and she pursued it despite the pain it caused her. She’s another in a long line of “little” people in Scripture whose only surviving name is “anonymous”. She’s just known as the Canaanite woman (or, in St. Mark’s Gospel, the Syro-Phoenician woman). We know very little about her, but thankfully what we **do** know includes the most important detail about her life: she had a daughter whom she loved beyond words. That unnamed daughter had an unnamed illness that was so awful her mother assumed the child had been taken captive by an evil spirit, possessed by the devil.

The mother and daughter were Gentiles, not Jews. They were “pagans,” that negative word used for people who believe in many gods, not one. But just as we wouldn’t care about the religion of the person who operated the defibrillator needed to get our heart going on in an emergency, this mother didn’t care if the physician or priest or miracle worker who could cure her daughter worshiped Zeus, Jupiter, Zoroaster, Osiris or Yahweh. She had heard of a Jew

named Jesus who had cast demons out of other people and made the sick well. Wild horses couldn't have kept her from finding and speaking with Him.

Others had heard of Jesus too. It must have been like trying to get near the Stone Pony once word is out that the Boss is playing there for the evening. Our anonymous friend is reduced to shouting at Jesus over the heads of the crowd. You know the story. Jesus ignores her – doesn't even give her the dignity of a direct "No!". She's so persistent and so strident that the disciples lose patience and ask Jesus to get rid of her, to send her packing. Another very different translation has the disciples suggesting to Jesus, "Send her away satisfied". In other words, give her what she wants, anything she wants, just so she'll leave us alone! Jesus then reminds them that He's only come to save the lost sheep of Israel (i.e. to help Jews not Gentiles).

This determined mother will not take silence as an answer and somehow manages to squeeze close enough to Jesus to kneel at His feet.

"Lord, help me."

She's cut her request to the quick. She addresses Jesus as Lord, letting Him know that she believes He has power to heal. "Lord, help me." She doesn't repeat the details about the daughter in need of an exorcism. She keeps the prayer, the request from the depths of her heart, short and sweet.

"Lord, help me."

As Macrina Wiederkehr says in her book, *A Tree Full of Angels*,

The words he finally gave to her sounded like anything but help. His silence had been less insulting. (p. 44)

Jesus' response isn't what we really want to hear coming from Jesus' lips.

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."  
Matthew 15.26

It's interesting reading some of the older commentaries on this passage. They really want to get Jesus off the hook. They suggest He used the word for puppies, not dogs. They suggest He was using this woman to teach the disciples a lesson, and intended to heal the child all along. They emphasize, "He **did finally** heal the child!" As the story goes, though, Jesus really does slam a door in this poor woman's face. And like Mike Christian in that prison cell, she doesn't let the pain of rejection that Jesus has just inflicted stop her from going back for more. She doesn't accept Jesus' refusal to free her daughter from spiritual prison.

This mother will **not** abandon her mission of obtaining healing for her daughter. She has good people skills as well as equal amounts of faith and chutzpah. She doesn't act outraged or contradict Jesus' comment about the relative rights of children and dogs. She simply and humbly points out that even the dogs get the crumbs under the table. She is willing to play any role Jesus casts her in, except that of despairing mother returning empty-handed to her sick child.

For her child's sake this woman has gotten on her knees and begged, and then some. Being dismissed in silence, being rebuffed and referred to as a dog to her face, doesn't daunt this woman. Her ego is puncture-proof because this isn't about her. She is on a mission for her daughter. Whatever happens to her as mother along the way is irrelevant. All that matters is her daughter's healing. She doesn't need Jesus to like her or embrace her. She just needs Jesus to set her daughter free.

Jesus responds to this nameless mother's dogged persistence, deep love, incredible pluck and impressive faith. He gladly changes His mind, confronted with her unwillingness to take no for an answer:

"Woman, **great** is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."  
Matthew 15.28

That's in contrast to what Jesus had had to say to Peter as he had begun to sink beneath the waves:

“You of **little** faith, why did you doubt?”  
Matthew 14.31

This Canaanite woman surely believed **Jesus** walked on water, though she'd never seen it, after He healed her little girl....

If there is something you've been praying about that's left you feeling like God has slammed the door in your face, take this Scripture to heart. Shout your prayer out loud, dive to your knees in supplication, and cry out,

“Lord, help me!”

Especially if the prayer you pray is for someone else, remember the story of the Canaanite woman. Practice her perseverance, assume her humility, and believe with all your heart that Jesus is powerful to save. Be willing to suffer the pain of what seems like repeated rejection. Be dauntless. Be brave. Be faithful. Be expectant. Amen

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham