

Sermon for Sunday, August 16, 2020 - "Be the Answer to Our Prayers"

Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

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Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus.

I say that every week - "grace to you and peace". But oh my, do we need grace and peace these days. As if things weren't hard enough, now so many family members, friends and colleagues in Iowa have been hit by terrible storms. Lord have mercy, we cry; Lord help us, we cry - along with the Canaanite woman in our Gospel reading today. Like her, we are hungry for good news, hungry for healing. And sometimes it feels like God is not listening, like God is refusing to help - as Jesus first ignores and then refuses to help the woman in this story.

This is a really troubling story. It raises all sorts of questions. Why does Jesus, the very face of God's compassion, refuse to heal this woman's daughter? Why does he call her a dog saying it isn't fair to take what's intended for the children of Israel and throw it to the dogs? The children of Israel are indeed God's chosen people, but shouldn't Jesus help other people, too? The Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel, but doesn't Jesus tell us to turn the other cheek? And why does he call her a dog? That seems a bit extreme.

Many interpreters feel this encounter helped Jesus to see that his mission was for all people, even ancient enemies of Israel. And maybe that's what happened. We don't know; we can't really know for sure. One thing we can see in this story is the power of persistent faith. This woman just keeps crying out - have mercy on me, Lord. Our translation makes it sound like she asks for mercy once, but the Greek is clear - she keeps on shouting, "Kyrie eleison - have mercy on me, Lord." She uses the same language we just sang together, Kyrie eleison.

She persists in pleading for mercy even when Jesus doesn't answer. She persists even when his disciples strongly urge Jesus to "send her away". She persists even when Jesus says his mission doesn't include her and calls her a dog. She kneels at his feet and pleads with him. She doesn't give up but stays engaged, offering a strong, thoughtful, humble response back to Jesus. Jesus is moved by her response and heals her daughter.

This story reveals a God who's influenced by our persistence. What this woman did and said made a difference to Jesus. Our persistence, our willingness to engage - it matters to God. We see that throughout scripture. Our willingness to ask questions and struggle with faith and prayer - it matters. Our prayers and our work for all impacted by COVID, the economic turmoil, racial injustice and now the derecho storms - it all matters.

Yet this kind of persistence doesn't come easily. When we've prayed, worked, questioned, hoped and pleaded yet don't see any change, it's so easy to give up and think that God doesn't really hear, that God doesn't really care. Thankfully, God doesn't just sit around hoping we will be persistent. God is much more persistent than we will ever be.

God persists in loving, challenging, forgiving and healing us again and again. And God cannot be stopped from doing this. Even when we put Jesus to death on a cross, he rose again. Nothing, not even death, can prevent God from loving us all and working to heal us all. God's persistent, determined love for us gives us strength to have dogged yet humble persistence in prayer, in seeking mercy and healing.

Often, we find that God gives us the strength and guidance to become the answer to our own prayers, to be the ones who bring God's persistent healing into the world.

For example, I give thanks for the ways that persistent prayer and work has brought important change in our church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. This year we celebrate 50 years of ordaining women, 40 years of ordaining women of color, and 10 years of ordaining people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and gender non-conforming. Our church is stronger, more inclusive, and more able to witness to our good and faithful God now that we ordain these people with gifts for public ministry. These changes happened as the Holy Spirit worked through the faithful persistence of women, women of color, LGBTQ folks and their advocates. They kept praying, kept working, kept shouting even when many in the church acted like Jesus' disciples in our story today and said, "Send them away."

Now, I pray that God will help us persist in becoming an anti-racist church - actively working to address racist policies, practices and ideas in our church and in our society. I pray God will help those of us who are white to listen to people of color who keep on shouting for help, justice, mercy and change. They are the faces and voices of the Canaanite woman in our day. I pray we will keep listening and join our voices, our prayers and our hands with them.

Good Shepherd's Congregation Council has committed to doing implicit bias training. We're also working to form a racial justice task force to examine policies, practices and ideas within this congregation and work on action plans. Please join in prayer for this work. Please let me know if you are interested in serving on this task force. Please also continue in prayer and support for those impacted by all the national disasters our country is facing. Give to the Mutual Aid Network Fund, drop off supplies to support storm victims in Cedar Rapids. Be the answer to our prayers.

God's persistence, determination for you gives you the strength you need to have dogged, yet humble persistence in prayer and in service.

Let's take a moment for silent prayer.