



SERMONS

by

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Bible readings: Matthew 15: 10-20, 21-28 and Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Key aim: 1) Exploring the woman's response to rejection

2) Exploring Jesus' response

Title: "From Rejection to Acceptance"

What does faith mean to us? Let's turn our attention to the book of Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28, which we heard read earlier. In this reading, Matthew presents an encounter between Jesus and his disciples and a mother who would not give up – a mother who turned rejection into acceptance.

The Narrative

In this morning's gospel reading, we meet a desperate mother with a sick daughter. Imagine that this is your own daughter who you've sacrificed so much for – the pain of childbirth, sleepless nights, years of care and nurturing. You've watched her grow from crawling to taking her first steps. You can still remember her beautiful face and the joy in her eyes on her first day of school. She's your little girl, and this is a story of a mother and her daughter.

Maybe she has suffered from anxiety and other illnesses from time to time, but this illness is different. Strange voices come out of her mouth. She screams and shouts constantly. Her hair is no longer nice and neat. She can't eat, can't sleep, can't go to school, and can't play. There's a constant and disturbing look in her eyes. When you move closer to her, she moves back, avoiding your touch. She's scared of herself around you. All she wants is for mommy to tell her that everything is going to be alright. She just wants this nightmare to be over. Whenever we feel distressed or desperate, all we want is for our loved ones to care for us and offer healing; but how does a mother offer comfort in such difficult circumstances?

You're finding it hard to come to terms with the fact that your little princess is demon-possessed. You can imagine how helpless this poor mother feels, right? "I'm losing my little princess! Somebody please help me! I'm losing my little princess!"

Perhaps you know what it feels like to see your daughter or son being tormented by demons, or your spouse, sibling, or parent diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. Whether it's related to cancer, drugs, alcohol, or gambling, the feeling is the same, or at the very least, similar. It's a desperate, helpless feeling, right? So maybe you can understand how this mother feels in the passage. You know how strong a mother's love is. She will travel anywhere, night or day, in search of a solution, medicine, or whatever her child needs. I'm sure she had been to her GP, A&E, but to her distraught, they can only suggest a mental health unit. She had been to see a Reverend Minister for healing, but to her disappointment, nothing changed.

To make matters worse, her community leaders seem to think it's an inherited curse because she's a Canaanite. The Canaanites are equivalent to present-day Palestinians. She almost accepts it after being reminded of the appalling things her people did previously: slaughter of children and so on. But all she can think about is how innocent her little princess is and the thought of losing her. Finally, out of options, feeling helpless, she hears news about a special man in the area called Jesus casting

out a demon from another woman's daughter near Tyre. Jesus is coming her way, and she's desperate to meet him (v.22).

Matthew tells us she came crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is tormented by a demon" (Matthew 15:21-22). She kept on crying out and following Jesus. She wanted his full attention. She is desperate to save her princess, so she presses her case to Jesus, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me." My question is this, have you got to that point of desperation? Are you feeling rejected? Like this mother, are you desperate enough to seek the help of God?

So what did Jesus finally say?

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said. He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs" (Matthew 15:24-26). In other words, I have more important people to deal with.

Can you imagine what she must have felt? What would you have said? It is hard when you feel like God is silent in your situation, but worse when you're not deemed important because of your identity. You need a breakthrough, but everything seems impossible.

I recall a season in my life where I was out of a job for a good few years. I had graduated with a bachelor's and a master's degree. I was all dressed up but with nowhere to go in a hurry. Expensively educated with a large debt - unable to work for personal reasons. Furthermore, I was experiencing constant migraines, visual problems, sleepless nights, and feeling depressed. I felt desperate and helpless. I had lost zeal for life. My dreams and ambitions were falling apart. I felt rejected by God, but I kept going. I was seeking divine intervention.

All I remember thinking is that there is hope. I need to persevere. Brothers and sisters, in hindsight, I can say this was a test of my faith. Like the woman faced with rejection, I cried before God, worshipped Him, and committed myself to answer my calling and proclaim the good news. My question is this; can you worship when everything is falling apart, and all you see is darkness? Can you worship when you don't get the answer you crave?

In the case of this poor woman, she's crying out because her daughter is demon-possessed, and Jesus appears to label her a dog. "It is not good to take the children's bread and to cast it to dogs" Verse 26. The Pharisees used to refer to the Canaanites as street dogs - barking all night and eating their own vomit. The truth is if we reflect on our behaviour, we can remember times when we have acted like dogs. We may have engaged in gossip, backstabbing, adultery, harbouring envy, and jealousy.

And worse than that, we come to church, listen to powerful sermons, ask for forgiveness, and when God forgives us our sins, we sometimes go back to doing the same thing again.

But what does Jesus really mean by dog? Jesus was not calling her a street dog; she describes her as a domesticated dog that depends on its master for food and shelter and stays close. And with great faith, this poor woman turned this apparent rejection into acceptance.

She replied, "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She acknowledges Israel's priority, accepts Jesus as her master, disregards possible interpretation of the usage of dog by the Pharisees, and appeals to Jesus' unconditional compassion. I believe with such faith no matter who has it; it can't be ignored for it reveals her pure heart.

Irrespective of her circumstances, she bowed down to worship the Lord, presses Jesus in order to compel Him to practice what He preaches – setting the oppressed free. You're my Master and my daughter's Master too. You're all that I have. I have kept your covenant so please save my little girl! Jesus commends her attitude as an expression of faith – trusting that the power of God works through Jesus and that her daughter can still be healed from Jesus' crumb. So Jesus said to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:27-28)

How does this relate to us?

We live in a country where there are around 11.9 million disabled people. Many have, for years, been oppressed and rejected, feeling lonely, living in poorer urban areas as a result of government policy. To be honest with you, sometimes when I sit down and reflect in search for theological answers, I can't help but wonder why some people have to suffer so helplessly and where the Lord's hand is in all of this?

Let's draw our attention to our first reading from the book of Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 which we heard read earlier. Isaiah prophesies about God's salvation for everyone (Jews and Gentiles) who obey the Lord.

Isaiah writes, "Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed."

So what can we take from this?

1. First, I believe the Lord wants us to look at the world as messy, full of events which seem meaningless, hopeless, and helpless and yet through that, the Lord remains Lord, testing our faith, and He always does something beyond our human understanding. This is very important to hold on to. For this will help us to remain positive and care for the rejected in our church and community even as we grow weak.

2. Second, whatever difficult circumstance or illness we're confronted with, we must not fear for Christ our master is with us to comfort us. Let's stand on His promises to restore our soul again. He's done it before and he'll do it again.

At the start of my sermon, I asked, what does faith mean to us? “Faith is taking the first step when you don’t see the whole staircase” – Martin Luther King. May God give us strength, courage, and the Spirit of perseverance to draw closer to Him in faith to turn our situations around. **Amen.**