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St. Demetrius Ukrainian Orthodox Cathedral
September 23, 2018
17th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 15:21-28

The Canaanite Woman

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

SLAVA ISUSU KHRYSTU!

Many of you know that in my career as a teacher, I taught History. It's an area of study for which I have a particular interest and affection. It seems the more I study History, the more I find that ancient times were not very different than our current times. It also seems that the more we study Holy Scripture, we find faith in the most unlikely people and places. Today's Gospel lesson is one of those occasions.

In today's Gospel we are presented with a woman who was a member of a community frowned upon, looked down upon or generally, not accepted by the majority. She was a Canaanite. She was not a Jewish woman. The Canaanites were the people that were conquered by the Israelites when Moses led the people out of Egypt into the Promised Land. The trouble was that the land promised to them by God was already inhabited...by the Canaanites. There were battles and struggles and eventually, the Israelites, with God's help, overtook the land. When they did overtake the land, the Canaanites became a minority. They were pagans, worshipping pagan gods, and generally, looked down upon, and treated poorly by the Israelites who had conquered them. Even when the Israelites had been conquered themselves, by other peoples over the centuries,- Babylonians, Persians, Greeks, and by the time of Jesus, the Romans, - the Canaanites still were at the bottom of the social strata. They were considered to be

dirty, pagan and uncivilized. The lowest off the low. It was better not to deal with them at all.

And today, we see the Lord being confronted by one. And a woman, no less! Dirty begger woman! Why would our Lord even go into Tyre and Sidon? These were known areas of the Gentiles. Jews, for the most part, did not live there. Canaanites and other pagan people lived there. Why would He even go there? The Fathers of the Church in their explanations of the Gospel tell us that the Savior knew exactly what He was doing. In their commentaries, its almost as if Christ knew that this woman was there waiting for Him or expecting Him.

He goes into this area and immediately this woman hears about His presence and she starts following after Him. The Apostles are doing what we might expect, what we might have done ourselves when we've found ourselves in what we would call today a "sketchy neighborhood." They try to rush Jesus along; they try to just get Him and themselves out of there as quick as possible. But she is insistent. She calls out to Jesus. The Gospel says she yells! She is yelling because she is desperate. You see, she was not so different from the Jews after all. She was a mother with a problem. Her child. Her daughter was in trouble. Big trouble. And like any mother, Canaanite, Jewish, or any other nation, she loved her daughter, and was in torment over her daughter's condition.

At first Jesus ignores her. We might think that this is odd. We have always been taught that Jesus is kind and gentle. Why would he ignore her.? It doesn't fit in with what we know about Jesus. He seems rude. The Apostles want rid of her. They tell the Master to send her away. She's making a spectacle of herself ...and them, too. She's a Canaanite! Get rid of her somehow. Jesus seems to become even more unkind. He tells the Apostles, - not her, mind you, - He tells them that He has only been sent to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. In other words, He has nothing to do with her.

The story gets more interesting. The woman only GETS LOUDER! She will not be ignored. She is persistent. Probably because she is desperate. She gets close enough to Christ and the Gospel tells us, she falls down at His feet, begging Him and , here's the interesting thing, worshipping Him. Perhaps, she isn't a pagan at heart. She may be a Canaanite, but she has enough knowledge about the Jews to know their

teaching about the Messiah. She has called out to Him saying “Lord” and “Son of David”. She is acknowledging Jesus to be that Savior. She gets close to him and says “Lord help me. She doesn’t say, “Help my daughter;” she says, “ Lord, help me.” She is in torment BECAUSE of her daughter. This leads one to believe, her daughter wasn’t sick physically, as much as her daughter was sick, spiritually. And her daughter’s behavior was causing the mother extreme torment. Kids can do that to their parents sometimes. Kids can actually ruin their parents lives, if allowed to. Was the daughter a teenager, who had gotten in with the wrong gang? Was she leading a life of ill-repute? Was she under the control of a man who was leading her into sin? Was she leading an immoral life? We don’t know. We know that the mother said she was demon possessed. In any case, the mother wanted her daughter to be made well. And surprising though it may be, Christ gets even ruder yet. He finally does speak to her. He refers to her as a dog. He tells her that it isn’t right to take the children’s food and give it to the little dogs. He is calling her a dog.

In the Middle East, at least at that time, there was this little game where one person would make a statement and the other person would answer and come back with a quip or a retort in a friendly sort of manner. It was meant to get “the upper hand” as it were, and to show skill and intelligence. In that manner, it wasn’t much like modern day New Jersey. We, too, like to come back with smart aleck answers. We appreciate that.

This mother is determined; she will not be turned away. Even after the Lord calls her a little dog. She takes the insult - she accepts the insult - and turns it around. She answers Him: Yes, Lord, but even the little dogs get the scraps from the Master’s table. She acknowledges she is not a Jew and has no right to the graces that Christ is administering to His people. But, if she is a little dog, then so be it; - because even the little dogs can expect the leftover graces. That’s all she is asking for; as far as she is concerned, that’s enough!

Now the acknowledgement comes from Jesus. He looks at her and He does not say, “ You have faith.” What He says is, “ O woman, GREAT is your faith. Let it be to you as you desire.’ He doesn’t ask what the problem is with the daughter, or what cure she needs. He just tells her, “Let it be for you as you desire.”

We have a very dramatic episode here. We are puzzled by Christ's initial behavior. The fathers of the Church tells us this was done purposely. Jesus ignored her at first and was seemingly rude to her, in order to show how persistent she was. In order that others may see her great faith. She would not give up and He knew this. He wanted others to see it. He wanted the Apostles to see her perseverance. St. Theophylact tells us that faith is necessary and it needs to be made manifest. This is what the woman was in the process of doing, and this is what Christ was allowing to play out. Moreover, it is a lesson to us in prayer. How often have we prayed and then get lazy in our prayer. How often, when we don't perceive God answering our prayers, we just give up? The Canaanite woman is an example and lesson to us to persevere in our struggle daily and in our prayer. She stands as an example to keep working on it.

Prayer does not come easily and it doesn't bring results immediately. Nothing worthwhile comes easily. If it did, it wouldn't have such great worth. Prayer requires daily and consistent work. The Canaanite woman was consistent and definitely persistent. And in the end, she received her reward.

There is another lesson we cannot overlook. The Canaanite woman was an outcast, as I have said repeatedly. Yet, we see here, that her faith was great. If we look in the pages of the Gospel, we find the instances where Christ remarks on the greatest faith being from people from whom we normally wouldn't expect it. The Canaanite woman is a prime example. She was not of the House of Israel, she was someone in a marginal, unaccepted community. And yet, Christ went into the territory. Nothing our Savior did was without purpose. He knew what He was doing when He went there. Saint Augustine tells us, that this was done exactly so that her faith can be made manifest. Very often, we look upon others and see them as something lower than ourselves. We marginalize persons and disenfranchise groups of people. We count them as something less than ourselves and therefore, unworthy of the graces we receive. Christ is showing us today, that this is not His way. He is showing us that great faith can come from the most unexpected people and places, and that therefore, even the one we look down upon the most, can be the greatest in God's eyes. Everyone deserves the same dignity as a child of God. All of us are made in the Image

and Likeness of God. ALL of us. Everyone has a place at the Master's Table. We need to make them welcome at the Table.

My brothers and sisters, let us take these lessons that the Master is teaching us today. Let us use the Canaanite woman as an example to grow and persevere in our prayer life. Let us examine our lives to see where we might have failed to live up to God's ideal, and may have disenfranchised someone or made them to feel less than the Image and Likeness of God, and let us persevere in that prayer to be better at welcoming all at the Master's Table.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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