

Sermon for Proper 18 Year B

Mark 7:24-37

Are there times you have prayed to God, and you end up confused and even wonder if God has even heard your desperate prayers. Have you ever wondered why God has allowed to happen the very thing you prayed to God not to happen?

Like the woman whose daughter was possessed by a demon, our most anxious prayers to God are for the sake of a loved one. For them to be relieved of the suffering that we see them go through. For them to be healed so they can be free of the sickness, the pain, the suffering, the oppression that has overcome them.

Have you prayed over a friend and couldn't understand why it feels as though you weren't heard? Have you prayed for healing, but it appeared God was not listening, not to the way we wanted them healed anyway? You persisted in prayer for even a crumb. But they became worse a lot quicker than predicted.

So, why do we pray? It's because like the Syrophenician woman we pray to Jesus because we know he alone can heal. We read the acts of healing Jesus performed in the bible, we hear how people are healed in Jesus' name, so why not heal our friend. Why then are loved ones not healed or still gripped by depression and anxiety?

Many say: "I can't believe in a God who allows bad things to happen to innocent children." Perhaps these people have prayed to God for their child and felt as if their request fell on silent ears. Have you ever felt like the Psalm writer in Psalm 22? *My God, ... why are you so far away? Won't you listen to my groans and come to my rescue? I cry out day and night, but you don't answer, and I can never rest (Psalm 22:1-2).*

Then there are the times we can see how God has responded. We can all probably think of times where we have seen God answer our prayers in amazing ways. Some people would realise an amazing coincidence how things worked out. There are no co-incidences. They are all God-incidents. Even if they don't turn out how we expect they are all God-incidents as God has said he works for the good of all those who love him.

It's easy to ride on the highs of our Christian experience and be elated over the way we have seen God work in our lives. There was once a news item where a man walked away from what looked like a mangled car resting against a tree. Posts on social media were saying he should buy a lottery ticket, others said it wasn't his time, and yet another, somebody was watching over him.

Our experiences of prayer and answer to prayer can seem like a roller coast experience. It can be smooth and calm where things are going well in our lives and we give thanks to God for his goodness. Then all of a sudden there are twists and turns in our life that cause us to be anxious and plead for Jesus to help us get through these twists and turns.

Today we hear where Jesus was in Gentile territory and had gone into a house for a rest and to get away from the crowds. But as soon as she heard about him, a woman whose little daughter was possessed by an impure spirit came and fell at his feet.

While we cannot know exactly what Jesus was thinking, as this Syrophenician woman came to him, Jesus' immediate response is to appeal to the limits of his mission, his call to serve his own people. In Matthew's version of this story, Jesus begins by saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 15:24). In Mark 7 Jesus says, "First let the children eat all they want," he told her, "for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs."

That's sounds a bit nasty of Jesus.

But this desperate mother comes back at him with a clever response, "Sir, even the little dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" (Mark 7:28), Jesus can only agree. "For saying that, you may go", Jesus says. The demon has left your daughter" (Mark 7:29). Jesus shows that God's love and healing power know no ethnic, political, or social boundaries. Jesus praises the woman's faith, and tells her, her daughter is healed. She receives the gift of salvation.

Like the Syrophenician woman we come to Jesus assured of the promise to ask and you shall receive, and whatever you ask for in my name it will be given. Even though we are not even worthy to come into Jesus' presence because of the sin in our lives, it because we have heard about Jesus, we come to him with our prayers.

In boldness we ask for even a crumb of mercy. As Martin Luther approached his death, he spoke these words. 'We are beggars this is true'. As beggars we open ourselves to Jesus' mercy.

Just as the Syrophoenician women received far more than just a crumb, we have confidence Jesus will answer our prayers according to his goodness and mercy. So, what is it that gives us the confidence to persist in prayer even though sometimes it appears Jesus is not interested in helping?

Let's look at this way. If you need help with something, whether it's at work, or home, or you're in the middle of doing something and you need help, who do you call upon? Why do you ask that person and not some else? Is it because you know they are trustworthy and you can confidently call upon in a time of need?

That's the reason we continue to pray to Jesus. We believe he hears our prayers, and gives us much, much more than crumbs. Even though we all come as beggars to the table, it is solely by God's grace that we receive healing and salvation. Even though as beggars we could only ask for crumbs, Jesus has given more than enough. He gives to us abundant life. Jesus does not leave any of us in a state of beggarliness. He seats us at the table and claims us as God's beloved children -- children from every tribe and language and nation. God's table is immeasurably larger than we can imagine.

Because we know God's heart and his character of love and mercy, we have confidence to come to God through Jesus in prayer. Even though there are times when God may appear silent, or perhaps even appear cruel, it is then when we cling to what Jesus words of promise, 'Behold I am with you always'.

It's what gives us the confidence to know that even though our loved ones didn't receive temporary healing in response to our prayers, they did receive complete healing, of no more pain, no more suffering, no more death, and are living in God's eternal presence free from any evil spirit.

In faith and confidence, in our weakness, we can continue to bring our requests to God through Jesus, because we know we will receive far more than crumbs.

Amen.