

Sermon Text: Mark 7:24-37

Now, I don't know anything about God except what I read in the Bible and what I know from my prayer life. What I know from the Bible is that God is creator and sustainer and owner of all there is, including me. What I know from prayer life is that God seems to have a sense of humor. Now some of you look at me funny when I say that, but don't look at me funny, God does have a sense of humor. I think I can give you an example and settle that point to your satisfaction. God called me to preach. God has a sense of humor. As I said this morning, the better you know me, the funnier that is.

The more we talk about prayer, the more we realize that real prayer is not just insert request, add Jesus' name, say Amen, and up pops the answer like a piece of toast from your toaster into your waiting hands. That's not prayer. Prayer doesn't work like that. Answers do come. If you are bold enough, if you are fierce enough, and if you trust enough, trust God enough to argue and wrestle, some answer will come. Now, the answer may be no, but some answer will come.

In prayer and in faith, we Christians stand in the line of Israel. Now, you know that. We stand in the line of Israel. It's the Judea Christian tradition. Some people don't know that or they don't make that very clear connection in their minds.

Gus McClain, a Presbyterian minister, was once chastising his ten-year-old son because he had been picking on and he got into a fight with a Jewish boy at school. His son was talking to him. He's a Presbyterian minister, and he said, "Son, don't you know that Jesus was a Jew?" The boy said, "Whoa, no, Dad, I didn't know! I knew that God was a Presbyterian, but I had no idea that Jesus was a Jew!" Yes, Jesus was Jewish.

We as Christians follow Israel in the line of faith, but maybe you have forgotten that the very name "Israel" means something. Israel means to wrestle, to wrestle with God. It is in the process of wrestling with God, in New Testament language, working out our salvation with fear and trembling, it is in that process that we are changed. Philippians 2:12 is that verse. "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling for God is at work in you." God is at work in you both to will and to work for His good pleasure, and so do all things without grumbling, without questioning. Now, the other side of "without grumbling, without questioning" means to trust, to trust. To trust God even though you know there will be times of fear, there will be times of trembling, there will be times of wrestling against God's will. People of God have always, always gone through these times.

As a low country preacher might say, "If your faith is easy, then you ain't growing." Wrestling. Fear. Trembling.

After wrestling all night, you know the story, Jacob, after wrestling all night with God, received three things. He got a blessing. He got a limp. He got a change. His name was changed from Jacob to Israel. Beyond the wrestling though, there must be a foundation

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of trust. Abraham trusted God, and God accounted him as righteous because of his trust. Now, Abraham was not, in fact, righteous, but because of his trust, Abraham was accounted as righteous. Above all, God wants our trust. Abe trusted God even when God told him to sacrifice his son, an unimaginable command. You know the story, in the end God did not require Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, but God apparently did want to know if Abraham trusted Him completely. His trust was blessed. God wants us to trust His love, to trust His will, to trust His boundaries, His boundaries, which are the Ten Commandments, to love God and to love neighbor, to trust His son in the New Covenant, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Real faith and real trust and real trust and faith are absolutely going to smack up against your will from time to time, and are gonna smack up against what passes for common sense from time to time, and real faith and trust are going to smack up against manmade walls and barriers from time to time. There are wrestling matches in our hearts and minds and souls and pocketbooks every day about whom we are going to trust and what it is that we should want and what it is that we should will to happen.

Now, today's Scripture in the Gospel is about a time when Jesus came up against long-time hatred, a deep-seated prejudice against a Gentile woman. She was a Syro-Phoenician. Matthew says that she was a Canaanite. You know, they were veil worshipers. In other words, this Gentile woman, this Syro-Phoenician, a Canaanite, whichever, she was by bloodline as far outside of Abraham's covenant as you can get. By bloodline, she was an outcast. This outsider refused to be cast out. She argued with Jesus. Imagine! She argued with Jesus! Jesus seems to have tested her faith by echoing the prejudice of His day. Matthew says that when she called out after Jesus, the disciples were embarrassed. They more or less said, “Jesus, do something! She's coming after us!” She did not care about convention. She did not care that she was embarrassing people. She got louder. She said, “Have mercy on me, oh Lord, Son of David. My daughter is severely possessed by a demon.” Jesus' responds to her by absolute silence. Then when she implores again from her knees, He responds in a most un-Jesus-like way saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.” Still, she would not be dissuaded from her mission of having her daughter healed. She believed that Jesus had the power to do it. She knew in her heart that Jesus was a man from God, and she trusted God's nature as being all together different than the nature of her Jewish neighbors, who were so prejudiced against her. Maybe Jesus was testing her in the way God tested Abraham. Maybe Jesus was testing her to see if her faith was half-hearted or to the bone. Maybe it was a teaching moment for the disciples and for us today, a teaching moment about what to do with our faith when it looks like God is saying no to us or what to do with our faith when it looks like God does not care and we are forgotten.

You know in Matthew 9, Jesus says, “According to your faith be it done to you.” According to your faith be it done to you. It occurs to me that we might sometimes in our lives say, well; God doesn't do much in my life. Well, how much faith do you have? How much prayer do you have? Just how foolish are you willing to appear in the eyes of others by actually believing that God responds to prayer. A prayer to God is an

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opportunity for God to act. It is sometimes also us wrestling with our own doubts and unbelief. In a crisis, in a moment of decision, do we casually pray and then just drop it and walk away? Or do we with fear and trembling pray our hearts out? Even if we are angry, even if we are angry, pray angry.

You know the Greek philosopher before the time of Christ named Seneca said we often want one thing, but we pray for another, not telling the truth even to God. Imagine! Not telling the truth even to God. I read that, and it rings a bell. Sometimes we are not truthful even in our prayers to God about what we really need, what we really want, what we really must deal with. Tell the truth to God. That’s my advice this morning. Just as the Syro-Phoenician woman did, tell the truth to God, and I am saying that angry prayers are okay. If you don’t think so, read the Psalms. It is filled with complaints and angry prayers.

Pray your heart out! Pray honestly! Pray unceasingly! Pray for real! Don’t pray just now I lay me down to sleep and let it be that! Pray for real!

Yes, the first time the Gentile woman cried out to Jesus, Jesus did not say a word. He did not even speak back to her. The second time, He said, in Matthew, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She knelt before Him, and said, “Lord, help me.” He answered. This was the third opportunity for Him to answer, and He said, “It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus. Imagine Jesus saying to this woman that He had nothing for her, that He came for Israel, His gifts were for Israel, and by implication, she was a Canaanite dog! That’s what the disciples thought. That’s why they were so embarrassed by her following. They were sitting smugly by, saying you tell her Jesus! We’ve got more important work to do and with more important people than you!

The ending though is when Matthew and Mark come together, and the versions agree completely when she refused to be put off. She refused to be put down. She refused to be ignored. She looked Him right in the face. From down there on her knees, she looked Him right up in the face, and she essentially said, yes, it might not be fair to take the children’s bread off the table and give it to the dogs, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master’s table, staring Jesus right in the eye. She knew the prejudice against her, but she believed beyond the prejudice and God’s compassion and mercy. She was saying I know that I am nothing in the eyes of your people, and I may be nothing in your eyes, but give me just a scrap of your love, and that will do. That will be enough.

Mark records Jesus saying, “You have answered well.” I picture Jesus smiling. He may have been saying you’ve passed the test. Matthew records Jesus saying to the woman, “Oh woman, great is your faith,” but they both agree that He said, “Your daughter is healed. It is done for you as you desire.” Her daughter was healed. Somehow, some way, in spite of prejudice from God’s coven of people, she held fast to a faith and a trust in God beyond and above it all. Imagine! She argued with Jesus! She demanded that

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God in Christ prove His compassion by healing her daughter! She did what the Pharisees could never do. She won an argument with Jesus!

I told my study group out at Wesley Commons that I might entitle this sermon “Don’t Argue with a Woman,” and they said, “Don’t you dare!” I didn’t. I want you to make the connection. The Pharisees with all their learning tried to trip up Jesus and never did. She refused to take no for an answer, and won this argument by her faith and her trust in God’s nature, above and beyond all the prejudice that Jesus was echoing, I think for the sake of His disciples, in that teaching moment. In the very tradition of Jacob, whose descendants rejected her, she wrestled with God, and she got the blessing, and she got the healing for her daughter.

More than once, Jesus said to be persistent in prayer. Knock and knock, and change hands and knock some more. Don’t lose heart in your prayer life. God does hear our prayers, but we sometimes miss the answers. As I said earlier, they don’t always just pop straight up instantly out of the toaster into our hands. Sometimes we wait and we wait and we wait some more. God answers. Pray with faith. Pray with trust. Pray without ceasing.

I want to close with a true story. When her husband, Edmund Gravely, died at the controls of his small plane on the way to Statesboro, Georgia from Rocky Mount/ Wilson in North Carolina. He died. His wife, Janice, was still in the plane. She kept the plane aloft and flying around even though she was no pilot for two hours until it ran out of fuel. During this time, she sang hymns, and she prayed for help, and as she crossed the South Carolina/North Carolina border, she radioed, “Help, help! Won’t somebody help me! My pilot is unconscious, won’t somebody help me.” And authorities picked up her distress signal but they were not able to reach her to respond to her during the entire flight because she kept changing channels. They couldn’t keep up with what channel she was on. Mrs. Gravely finally made a rough landing on her own and she crawled 45 minutes to a farmhouse for help. And she did survive. But how often God’s people cry out for help from God and then we switch channels before God’s message can come through. We turn to other sources for help. We turn to human help or we decide we can handle it ourselves. We cry out to God for his intervention. Stick with it. Don’t change channels. Pray without ceasing. Pray with trust. Pray with faith.

Remember this woman, this outcast, this outsider, this embarrassment, whose boldness and so much trust in God, overcame silence, overcame prejudice, and then what the Pharisees could never do, she won an argument with Jesus. Her faith, her unflinching belief that God would and could hold things together for her and Jesus Christ was a lesson for our half-hearted prayers. Pray without ceasing. Pray with trust. Amen.