

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCCEED

Proper 15, Year A – 2017

Fr. Ben Hankinson

If at first you don't succeed... could be a great subtitle for today's Gospel. Persisting in faith is a difficult topic to tackle. Out of curiosity I Googled "If at first you don't succeed", and one site that came up had a list of responses, none of which are positive. Some of them went like this, If at first you don't succeed,

Change the rules . . . make it someone else's problem . . . Destroy all evidence that you tried . . . Failure could be your style . . . click 'undo'. . . It must be someone else's fault. Find them. Blame them . . . Lower your standards . . . See if the loser gets anything . . . (and, of course) Quit.

What a negative approach to life. Technology and the instant gratification culture demand immediate results and success. Society tells us to pass the buck, check out when things don't go our way. But today's Gospel lesson is a stark contrast. It is a message of perseverance in the face of setbacks, persistence when what is most important is on the line.

Today, there is no buck to pass. The Canaanite woman has come to the source, the beginning and the end to find an answer, to find the answer. The woman approaches Jesus because she believes that he can and wants to heal her daughter. Her story doesn't suggest that if we pray long enough then we'll get on God's last nerve and he'll grant it to shut us up. No, it is a story of persistence in faith.

What is it that keeps the woman motivated? Surely Jesus is clear enough in his responses. It sounds like a bunch of No's to me. So why does the woman persist? Hasn't she heard, doesn't she understand? Friends, she understands better than any of us. She remains firm, rooted in the hope and faith that brought her to seek out Jesus. She hears what Jesus says precisely and responds to him.

First, she cries out to him, and he is silent. It seems like a no, but it isn't. That's because we get uncomfortable in silence. We sometimes perceive it as the world does, the absence of God. It is instead an invitation by Christ to dig deeper or sometimes listen a little more closely. Will you give up or will you go a little deeper, are you looking for a quick fix or a real answer, he's asking. Silence is powerful. Jesus is fully present in that moment, not ignoring the woman, but waiting.

So, she pushes on till the disciples get in on the action. Here Jesus says "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Sounds like another no. But it isn't, there is more to this than we first see. It is a statement of who Jesus is, as truly the Christ, the messiah, sent to redeem Israel. It is a proclamation of his mission and his ministry goals to reach the lost Israelites.

What it is not, is a refusal to minister to others besides Israel. In Isaiah today, we hear God say, “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” And like Isaiah, like Jesus, the Gospel mandate bids us to look outside of our immediate circle of friends and fellow parishioners. Yes, these are the first to whom we go. But they are not the only ones. Thus, Jesus does not say no, and does not send the woman away. He is saying to the woman as to each of us, are you truly listening to me? Dig a little deeper.

Now she stops Jesus, kneeling before him, putting herself in his path as she doesn't give up. How often do we let go of a desire, a prayer, a need because our patience has run out? We often hear and say, “no news is good news”. That is except when it gets personal and our patience runs thin. When everyone else is checking out, we are to place ourselves more fervently than ever before God, on our knees in submission, seeking him and his will.

In that moment, in today's Gospel, we may hear seemingly hard words from Jesus. He says to the woman, “It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” This common term Jews used for Canaanites and gentiles, is a not so subtle reminder that she has no right to the inheritance of Israel. Many would turn back at this, and even here, the woman presses on.

Why? She just doesn't seem to get the picture. She has been told her place by Jesus whom she sought out. What more is there? Were we to be publicly reminded that we have no rights by birth or status or any measure of this life, most would walk away in humiliation, hearing rejection; just as many when the light of life is shone on the darkness of our sins would turn away from the light. But where the world sees failure, the Canaanite sees a cracked-open door and moves, as we should, further up and into that healing presence.

Her response is not that of the world. It is not to be offended. She does not get indignant and defend herself. She knows she has nothing to offer and everything to gain. And so, she claims no rights, save those granted to her: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.”

“She catches the Lord Christ in his own words.” Luther says. “Yes, still more, with the rights of dogs she gains the rights of a child. Now where will he go, the dear Jesus? He has caught himself and must help her. But know this well: He loves to be caught in this way.

She says Lord, I may be a dog, but you would not begrudge a dog the crumbs that fall from the table. That small morsel is all that I seek. And that's precisely what this woman has done. She has waited on and pursued Jesus faithfully until he dropped that precious crumb into her waiting hands. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Luther also said: *If only we had the skill of this woman to catch God in his own judgment and say, ‘Yes, Lord, it is true. I am a sinner and not worthy of your grace. But you have promised*

forgiveness and did not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance.' Behold, Christ must then through his own judgment have mercy on us."

Humility is a constant in today's Gospel and a necessity to persevere in the faith. Without it, the outcome is impossible as we think too highly of ourselves and too little of our need for a savior. Through it there is the knowledge, yes of our sins, but even more of the hope that is in Christ, the promise of life in him. Knowing that the answer is beyond herself, the Canaanite humbles herself to approach Jesus, someone that by cultural standards should have shunned her very presence. Yet it is into his presence she goes clinging by faith to the hope that is Christ and not any pride or self-worth.

She humbly sits there as he makes her wait in silence. She listens to the reminder that she is not part of the in-crowd of the Israelites. And in the end, she admits to Jesus and all around him that she knows who and what she is, and by that very token, by a willingness to gather the crumbs that fall to the ground, she is granted a place to receive a portion of the grace allotted for Israel.

In this humble persistence of faith and dialogue with Jesus, she receives that which she sought, the healing of her daughter. More than that though, she is granted a child's portion, not because of her merit or righteousness, but because of the promise that is found in Jesus Christ alone. She battles Christ, fights for what is promised, not sitting back and waiting for it to come to her as many others expect from the Messiah.

Thus when we consider today's Gospel, we see persistence in faith. No, that doesn't mean nag God to no-end and it certainly doesn't mean to try and hold your breath and think you're going to force God to give in, but pursue him until he answers. No matter what the answer may be wait on him. Sometimes it will be no, sometimes yes, sometimes wait, sometimes a question in reply, and sometimes silence. Listen carefully when he responds, because the world will try to shade that answer. Remember that silence is not absence, and that we must persevere through not only the silence, but through the painful and bitter reminders of how broken we are so that we may recognize how much we need Christ. Strive for humility in all things, but most especially before God. It is only in humility that we are able to approach the table, no better than the Canaanite woman of faith.

Think on that this morning as we continue to worship. Think on how you are pursuing God today. Then, proclaim the majesty of God in the creed out of faith not repetitious tradition. Seek his audience in the prayers expecting him to show up and answer and not just saying the words. And as we come to the master's table, let us remember our place. As we ask, nay beg for that holy and life-giving bread, consider this question, my friends: are you willing to be satisfied with the crumbs?

Humble yourself enough to trust God's promise and with enough patience and persistence to listen to his true response. Only then may we come to hear God say in each of our hearts, Great is your faith!