

*Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost*

August 20, 2017

Sermon by Pastor Sam Wolff

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Matthew. (Matthew 15: 21-28)

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. She said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.'" Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

The Gospel of our Lord.

I'm going to bore you with another African story this morning.

Sometime in late May, early June, on the Great Serengeti Plains in East Africa, in Tanzania, there are all of these animals, and there's millions of wildebeests, but they're all spread out. But then at a certain time, let's say late May, two of these wildebeests, these great shaggy antelopes of the African plains, come together and form a small herd of two. And soon two more join them, and then there are a herd of four, and then more come and there are a herd of eight, and then sixteen, and thirty-two. And on and on it goes, until over a million animals stand there in this great mass.

We have been very fortunate to see this. And when you look out over those plains, it's solid black. You cannot see anything else. And there they mill around for a bit. And then at some point one of them will turn towards the north, and this vast herd of millions of beasts start running north, running over some of the most inhospitable terrain in the world. They run through deserts, they run through rain, they run over hills, they run through very steep valleys. And all along the way there are the predators, the lions, the leopards, the hyenas, who are waiting to feast. And because there are so many, some of these beasts, these predators can just barely walk, because they just take their pick of the one to kill.

But on they keep going. And nothing stops them, until they reach the great Mara River, which separates Kenya and Tanzania. And the Serengeti expands beyond that, but it's called the Maasi Mara.

And when they reach that river, there is a major obstacle, because the river isn't a nice, gently, you know, nice, with gentle banks. It's a cliff that goes straight down, probably fifty feet or so. And it's raging by that time because the rains had come. And in the river, well, there are a lot of crocodiles, and so a lot of the animals will get snatched up by them. And as they stand there, they know then one will dive in, and pretty soon they all start coming in. It's just this mass. It's incredible to see. And once they get across the river, they start to spread out. And pretty soon you can't see this mass anymore. They are spread out all over the plain, and you will see small herds of two or three. And there they mill around. The grass is lush. They eat and get fat, and start making babies.

And then some time in late August or early September, two of these wildebeests come back together. And this strange and wonderful dance starts all over. Why do they do that? Well, it's pretty obvious. The rains had stopped in Tanzania, and the grass was drying up, and so they had to go to where there was more grass, and they could live. And what they're doing, in a nutshell, is they're going towards that which brings life.

Our story this morning, our Gospel Lesson, is all about going towards what brings life. It's about a woman, an outsider, who had absolutely no right to come up and approach Jesus. She was a woman, so she was a second-class citizen. She was despised as a Canaanite. Her daughter was possessed, and actually frightening to many people, and so, like today, they didn't know quite how to deal with these people. And so Jesus totally ignored her. His attitude was, "Leave me alone. Don't bother me with your problems." The disciples, as they always were, were far more direct. They said, "Hey, get rid of her. Send her away. She's making a scene around here. We don't want her here."

But this woman was not deterred. She didn't go away. And, instead, she threw herself at the feet of Jesus, and cried, "Help me!" And then Jesus insulted her: "I'm here for the children, not for the dogs." But that's a whole another sermon. But this humble woman, most likely illiterate, born into the lowest of life, knew what brought life, and all of these things, insults and everything, would not deter her. So she went towards that which brings life. And she looked to Jesus and said, "Okay. Call me a dog, if you want. But even dogs get the scraps. Even dogs get something. So take care of your precious people, but leave me some crumbs, because crumbs is more than I have now." She went to the one who could bring life to her daughter. And then we get to see Jesus the way we know Jesus, and the daughter was cured.

Jesus speaks to us this morning. We may not want to include certain people in our circle, or in our country. He certainly didn't. And he made that very clear. Yet, in the end, he welcomed them as well. Christ made room at his Father's table of grace for this foreigner, showing us that there is a place at God's banquet for everyone.

The woman has a lot to teach us as well. She teaches us about faith and the greatness of faith, and her willingness to cross the barriers of racism and hate. Her refusal

to be put off or ignored just because of her station in life. Her humility in admitting that she, like us, do not deserve the love and mercy of Almighty God that's shown to us through Jesus Christ. But what I really like about this woman, because she is really one of my heroes of the Bible, I like her for her stubbornness. She saw what brought life, and nothing was going to stop her. She shows us the absolute faith that she had in Jesus. But that faith was challenged many times. It took tenacity to hang in there.

And just imagine that scene. She is in enemy territory, and she's shouting like a mad woman, but she just keeps going. Nothing would stop her. Her faith is challenged, but with her tenacity - she was rejected once, twice, probably more – but she just kept coming. And you know what? That's the way it is in faith. In our faith, we better be persistent in our Christian life, because that's the only way to survive.

People are leaving their church. People are leaving their faith. Christianity is on a steep decline in many parts of the world. And so now, we who are here, along with our brothers and sisters gathered around the world this morning, to remain faithful is often times a matter of just hanging on.

Some days our faith is challenged. It's challenged by so many things on the outside that we can't control: death and disease, personal problems, injustice. You know, how many times have I had somebody come to me as a pastor, saying, "Why God?" "Why did God let this happen?" Life does happen, and events that happen around us can defy and destroy us. And if we don't have the resolve, the firmness, even the stubbornness of this powerless woman, well, we might lose, too.

I witnessed this woman's faith, this kind of faith, certainly here and in congregations I have served. But I have also seen it in the Africans and their faith, because they have this faith in this loving God who is going to help and protect them no matter what, who is going to lift them up. And that's challenged so greatly, almost daily. These people are challenged by grinding poverty, disease, corruption, famine, drought, death. And yet they hang in there. And I have witnessed how persistent they are to hold on to that faith. Nothing will shake that, ever.

Every Sunday they come together, and they stay for hours. They sit in the church for hours. And they read the Bible. And then they sing, and they sing again. And they have at least two choirs, sometimes three or four. And one choir will sing and sit down, and then another choir will get up. And you'd better give them a lot of room because they're all over the place as they sing. And then the children will get up and sing. And then, at some point in the service, after an hour or so, an old man or old woman will get up and start talking about the community, who got married, who is sick, who had a baby. And they drone on and on, and sometimes I found it pretty boring. But for the people it was the very life of their community and they loved it.

Sermons are long, usually very, very long. I thought I would try that this last Sunday that I'm with you. But what people do during these very long sermons is they

may go outside for a little while and then come back. And children are always running around all the time. And everyone sings and dances.

And when I'm not at one of these Swahili services, I just get a feeling of everybody is just singing and dancing and worshipping. Praising God, and going for that which brings life.

But Africans are no better than any of us. Like us, there are both saints and sinners. And believe me, I saw both sides. But what they do offer us this morning is a lesson on hanging on to our faith, and never getting tired, ever, of always going towards Jesus Christ, going towards that which brings life, no matter what the issues are or what the challenges.

I have been abundantly blessed to be a part of this church, which like the church in Africa, it brings life. You know, I'm not an early-riser. And you can ask my wife Cindy, every Sunday morning I grumble around a little while. But once I get here, this place is filled with life. It's in different ways, in different language, different culture. But in your worship, in your music, in the chatter of your coffee time, in the youth and children, in your faithful members, in your service to others, you reach out to people you don't know, you visit each other, you visit the sick, and care for each other.

But I want to leave you with this thought: In your personal life, in your personal life, are you like this wonderful woman in our Gospel, because we all face barriers that stand in our way of living as Jesus Christ told us to live. And so ask yourself, what are those life-giving things to you? They are probably totally different in every one of you. But what are those life-giving things, those thoughts or prayers or actions that help you break through those barriers and lead you closer to our Saviour and Lord.

And now,

*May the peace of our Lord,  
which surpasses all understanding,  
keep your hearts and minds  
in Christ Jesus.*

Amen.