

The Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost – 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Romans 11:1-2a, 13-15, 28-32

Matthew 15:21-28

What the heck am I going to do? Have you ever had one of those moments? Do I take the red pill or the blue pill? Do I take the red pill and free my mind, becoming familiar, perhaps, with some unpleasant truths? Or do I take the blue pill and remain blissfully ignorant? Yogi Berra had a unique take on life's choices. He said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." How many of y'all have ever had buyer's remorse? You were conflicted, you didn't know whether this was going to be a super great purchase but you pulled the trigger anyway, and then... "Man! Why the heck did I buy this thing?" A running back has a hole opened up for him the size of a Mac Truck and his heart begins to sing. Then the middle linebacker, who has made his life miserable all day, steps into the gap and his heart sinks. The running back thinks to himself – I can juke right and run left or I can juke left and run right. He jukes left and just as he cuts to the right the linebacker flattens him. The linebacker grins, looks the running back in the eye and says: "Wrong choice, bro."

How many of you have ever been flattened like that running back by a choice you have made? Choices, binary choices, often come to us. Do I go left or right? In the Game of Life (the board game), it was either going to college or entering the work force – one or the other. Do I fish or cut bait? Do I get this huge tattoo of a bald eagle across both my shoulders or do I not? Christianity brings choices. The world or my faith? Serve my neighbor or serve myself? Self-indulgence (food, alcohol, spending) or self-restraint? Pride or humility?

A woman leads the way; a Canaanite woman. I could spend days eulogizing this woman. She is superlative, regal in every way, a living inspiration. You need to know her. You need to call her your friend and have her over for coffee. Her company is helium to your heart and lead in your shoes during this cultural tornado we are in. A Canaanite – she is a descendant of an OT race that is vile, whose foul practices started with worshipping every false god then moving to the lower ground of religious prostitution, and hitting rock bottom with child sacrifice. Canaan was the youngest son of Ham, who was the son of Noah. On one occasion, Ham grievously shamed his father and received a curse – the curse fell on Canaan. Canaan descendants more than fulfilled the curse. Radically idolatrous, the people of Canaan rejected God's law, God's grace, and engaged in detestable practices.

All of that makes this unnamed woman is the unlikeliest of saints. She is certainly beleaguered. No pain for a woman is like the pain of seeing her child suffer. What she herself must have endured from various people could have made her bitter, hardened of heart. Canaanites were looked down upon with a very active disdain by Israelites. She is, in every sense of the word, a beggar. Her need is great. Her daughter is caught in the dark web of demon possession, severely oppressed. Her prayer is a theological song, an acclamation of Divine Truth: "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David." She knows! This Canaanite woman knows! Jesus is the Christ, the Promised Messianic King. He is the One who will rule on the throne of David, Israel's great shepherd-king. The Word of the Gospel had reached her ears, creating in her a fire of love, a fire

of hope, a fire of faith. Her prayer is bold because faith is bold. The eyes of her heart see God's promised Shepherd. The eyes of her heart see herself of one of His sheep.

Her petition is laid at His feet with urgent simplicity. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." She was crying. Our Lord sees this in a way no one else can. He knows it is true. He came for all men, for all woman, regardless of their background (including her). God so loved the world... "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). The time appears ripe. The situation is fully pregnant and all signs point to Christ delivering a miracle. Help her, we all scream. Help her, bless her, alleviate her pain, exorcise the demon and bring her daughter back to the light. And Jesus answers her not a word... not a word! His disciples take up her cause. "Free her, for she keeps on crying after us." The Lord replies stiffly: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." She is tenacious. The faith of a bulldog abides in this woman; she will not let go. Kneeling, her prayer is distilled to three words: "Lord, help me."

Jesus is about to bring her to a fork in the road. Jesus is about to bring this woman to a moment that has been relived in Christ's church for two millennia. Jesus is the conductor, the Master of the orchestra, and this woman has within her a note of such eternal beauty and that note is about to be struck. Jesus prepares the musical score for her with a seemingly discordant rebuff: "And he answered, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.'" Hold that moment. Stop everything and put that moment in freeze frame. She has a choice to make. She is a sinner, like you, like me. She has been through the mill. Do you think that frustration is in her heart anywhere... anywhere? Is despair close at hand? Self-pity? Can you see a woman so thoroughly troubled that she drops down in a puddle of self-pity and whines like a four-year-old? I've been there. Or pride? Could pride have been awakened by Jesus' remark and could the woman have brought out some verbal poverty which is pride's calling card?

Scripture tells you that God is the potter and you are the clay. How many of you desire to be something beautiful? How many of you believe that pride is the secret to beauty? How many of you believe that humility, Christ's humility, is the most beautiful thing known to man? He is the Potter. You are the clay. Humility is the blood of Christ which moistens your spirit with the beauty of His sacrifice. You face choices every day. Pride or humility is a binary reality that comes upon you with uncommon frequency. Beauty – great beauty – do you want it in your life? Do you believe that pride will add to your joie de vivre – your joy of living? Joy of living – isn't it great to be a Christian at this time? Don't our hymns mean just a bit more at this time? Isn't the sacrament just a bit more fabulous at this time – when forces are at work to deprive us of it? Joy in the midst of difficulty – seeing your brothers and sisters who are enduring the same adversity as you and remaining faithful – isn't it great to see them? How many of y'all have been stretched? How many of y'all feel stronger?

It seems as though, as this virus continues, that God is answering us not a word. But in this moment, a children's hymn comes to mind: This little light of mine, I'm going to let it shine. Hide it under a bushel? No! I'm going to let it shine? Don't let Satan blow it out! No! I'm going to let it shine. Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine. Do we only let our light shine when situations are ideal? Was it ideal for the Canaanite woman? Is the church to go and make

disciples of all nations but only do it when it is safe? There's a fork in the road: "Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

In that priceless moment, the woman gave voice to a humility that is born from above. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." It is one of the most magnificent things that ever came from the mouth of man. She is magnificent. The beauty of her soul, her spirit, that such a thing could be spoken. She recognizes herself as of no account, a dog. Content with the Master's crumbs, she will take even the smallest act of kindness from Christ. He brought her to that moment. His love was alive in her. His humility had found a nest in her heart. He is the greatest who became the least. Heaven's Price becomes the Maximus Peccator (The Greatest Sinner) as He is crucified on a cross. That is eternal beauty – the source of beauty, the content of every song of heaven, the life which you embrace. Jesus healed the woman's daughter. He was going to do it all along. He brought her to the heights of living, the heights of faith, the heights of love by awakening in her His humility. He does the same with you. He gives you the bread of His body, the wine of His blood. He serves you. The Greatest serves you, the least, at this altar. Here you discover love, humility, and beauty. He leads you out into the world and the light of His glory is in you.

O woman, great is your faith! Not just, woman but O woman! I, for one, want to be the clay in His hands. I want to know that lady. I want to sit in her pew, listen to her pray, and kneel with her at our altar. There's Christian joy in that woman; joy and fortitude and devotion and contentment and love. And she does – she does sit in our pews. That same faith is alive in you – Christ is here to mold sinners into works of art. It is a joy to see. To Him alone be the glory.