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SERMON – SAINT JOSEPH PARISH

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In the 1970s wearing copper bracelets to counter the affects of arthritis and other joint pain was all the rage. I had an aunt who wore such a bracelet and swore it worked. Recent studies have shown copper bracelets provide no relief for pain.

People who suffer from chronic illnesses will try anything to get rid of it. Bracelets, magic stones and potions are still around. People may not actually believe the latest “cure-all” fad will work...but they may try it anyway...“Why not...it couldn’t hurt.”

The action in today’s Gospel takes place near Tyre and Sidon...cities in present-day Lebanon. Jesus and his disciples are making a trip into Gentile territory. The Canaanites were the original inhabitants of the Promised Land and were pagans. They may have been descendants of Canaan, one of Noah’s grandsons.

Parents will do anything for a sick child...the Canaanite mother in the Gospel story is no exception. She has a daughter who “has a demon and is in a terrible condition”. We can only speculate what her condition was or how it manifested itself. The mother is at her wits end and has come to Jesus for help.

Jesus does something that seems out of character...he ignores the woman...he gives her the silent treatment. Bothered by her persistent cries for help...his disciples want Jesus to send her away. Jesus then says his mission is to his own people...the Jews.

Our mother is not going to be put off by Jesus’ silent treatment or apparent dismissiveness...she persists...she demands from Jesus he take action and help her...she wants her daughter to be healed. Jesus then says it is not right to take good food from the table and feed it to dogs.

Dogs are mentioned 40 times in the Bible, never in a good way. They were scavengers...four-legged vacuum cleaners...that hung around garbage dumps devouring anything that was thrown out. In India and certain parts of the Middle East today, feral dogs that hang around the garbage dumps and roam the streets looking for food are called *pariah* dogs...and you don’t want them around.

Was Jesus calling the Canaanite mother a dog...a *pariah*...an outcast? Yes, of course he was...but not for the reasons we might think. And we know from the woman’s reply...she is not going away. “Even dogs get to eat table scraps,” she says to Jesus. She acknowledges Jesus is not some trickster with a magic bracelet...and her daughter is healed.

The woman’s persistence and her reply show us she has faith Jesus can actually help her and heal her daughter. She does not think he is a back-street fraud...she sees him as the real deal...who can help her even though she comes from the wrong side of town.

Jesus intended to help the woman all along...he never said no to someone who asked for his help or healing. He treated the woman the way he did as a lesson for his disciples and for us when we ask things of God. Jesus was saying, “Do you think I’m the real thing, or do you think I’m a magic act and a fraud?” Jesus wants us to be persistent in prayer and in asking things of him just like the Canaanite mother.

The Intercessions List we read at Mass contains the names of people we have been asked to pray for...some of the names are known to us...most are not. We are to be persistent in prayer and in asking God to heal our friends, co-workers and family members who are sick or in need of some other kind of help...but the Intercessions List is for our benefit...it is not a magic formula for healing.

When we petition God for help it is our faith that needs to be increased, not the sick people we are praying for. The Intercessions List is not a tool for getting God to do our bidding. It is wrong to think the longer people’s names stay on the Intercessions List the more likely we are to get God’s attention and then he will do something. We already have his attention and he has already done something

Saint Paul tells us in Colossians to be persistent in prayer. Like the Canaanite mother we are persistent because we know God does hear and answer our prayers and petitions. There is no such thing as an unanswered prayer. We get one of three answers: yes, no, or wait a while. It is possible we may not get a definite yes or no answer in our lifetimes.

We need to be persistent in our prayer lives but we also have to be aware of what we are petitioning for. Do we think of God, as an anonymous author put it, as a “cosmic vending machine?” Or do we follow the Canaanite woman’s example and throw ourselves down at Jesus’ feet asking for God’s mercy and blessings, because we know that’s what he offers?

Prayer is not a magic act but it is a powerful way to strengthen our faith. In the end, the Canaanite woman got more than table scraps...she got Jesus and his healing power and the restoration of her daughter to wholeness. We get Jesus too...and everything he offers...and that is better than table scraps or a copper bracelet anytime!

