HOMILY FOR 20TH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (YEAR A)

THEME: WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH (Matt. 15:28)

Lord, help me! (Matt 15:25)

Acts 10:34-35, Then Peter spoke up in the house of Cornelius, dear brothers and sisters, one thing I now know is that God has no favorites nor show partiality. Rather, in every nation, whoever fears him and acts uprightly is acceptable to him.

Is 56:7- Thus says the Lord, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples'.

How do you feel when God is apparently silent to your prayers? Have you persistently prayed for something and get the exact opposite as a divine response?

Beloved sisters and brothers, there is something deeply captivating about the Canaanite woman in the Gospel passage today (Matt 15:21-28). We learn from her a deep and resilient faith as she comes to the Lord with the desperate plea, 'Lord, help me' (Matt 15:25). In her, we see the loving heart of a mother that never gives up on her child.

The response of Jesus to her passionate appeal concerning her sick dying daughter looks bizarre and difficult to understand. Jesus seems silent. The disciples want her to go away so that they will regain peace and sanity. Then comes the dramatic exchange of words concerning the children's bread being thrown to the dogs.

Remarkably, this great woman of faith from Canaan (a pagan town) did not walk away. She didn't pick offence with Jesus nor the disciples. She remained. Her eyes were on the goal- the daughter desperately needed healing and the son of David, the Messiah, and healer is surely capable of doing that, so she remained with her consistent plea- Lord help me.

Her humble and persistent response to a seeming negative statement from Jesus is indeed profound- Please Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from their master's tables (Matt 15:27).

The woman's response reveals the depth of her faith. She never allowed herself to become angry nor discouraged. She simply holds unto Jesus. She believed that a small portion of the Lord's mercy is more than enough to heal her dying daughter.

And our Lord Jesus Christ could no longer hold his admiration of the Canaanite woman's resilient faith and simply exclaimed; 'O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish' (Matt 15:28). What a beautiful testimony of faith.

Many of us surely identifies with this woman and her situation. There are moments when we pray and God seems silent. We pray for healing, and the illness remains or the person dies. We pray for our spouse and children who have lost their faith and nothing seems to change. We pray

for peace in the family and the world, and we get global war as a response. We may just wonder, 'does God hear me at all?'.

This Canaanite woman teaches us something about faith. A continual trust in God even when we do not understand His ways. Heb 11:1 reminds us that faith is an assurance of what is hoped for and an evidence of reality unseen. This calls us to pause, ponder, and deeply reflect on our journey of faith and prayer life. The Canaanite woman came to Jesus with her pain and will not take no for an answer. Her firm hope in God who answers prayers is clearly manifested in the Gospel passage today.

Therefore, let us learn from this lovely Canaanite woman and make her prayers our own, 'Lord, help me' (Matt 15:25). Those three powerful words may be all we can say and that is enough. God surely knows the pains behind these words for each of us.

Jesus does not measure us by the difficulties and ordeal we have been through and the ones we face daily, nor the number of times we have been discouraged. He sees the faith with which we continue to turn to Him. The saints and martyrs all have their scares of their individual witness of faith- wounds from crucifixion, burnt skin, hanged ropes on their strangulated neck/bodies, blood poured forth like Jesus'.

May we have the courage and faith of the Canaanite woman: to keep praying, to keep trusting, and to keep believing that God's mercy and faithfulness is surely greater than our individual circumstances, so that one day we will hear the beautiful words of Jesus being addressed to you: "Great is your faith!".

The Word of God today further reminds us of our duty to bring people into the fullness of God's house, rather than shutting them out. We are inspired by Jesus' word and example to enable strangers and outcasts to be stakeholders in God's house. This is essentially the best of the Gospel of universal salvation in Christ. It is the distinguishing mark of the early Jesus movement. The Church continues to be stewards of this noble enterprise.

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah reminds the people in exile: "Have a care for justice, act with integrity and the Lord's salvation will come" (Is 56:1). He then goes on to spell out in concrete terms what it means to care for justice and to act with integrity. It means to embrace strangers and others who are considered outsiders. *"My house,* Isaiah proclaims*, shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples".* This proclamation is no small matter to the Jewish exiles. It amounts to a seismic shift in their understanding of who God is and what it means to be his people: a tribal deity gives way to a universal and all-embracing God. Through her own suffering, Israel learned to bring God's healing not only to its own citizens but to all suffering peoples of the world. Perhaps, that was the greatest learning for God's people in the time of trial. It was a silver lining in the dark cloud of the long exile.

In the Gospel, the message of Isaiah is further reinforced and enhanced by the example of Jesus. The story of the Canaanite woman is a powerful vehicle for the radical vision of what the

kingdom of God is like. It breaks down the walls that separate us because of race, gender, status and the like. The story is a powerful example of God dismantling the walls that divide the human family.

Jesus recognizes the strength of her faith and courage. He praises her "Woman, you have great faith. Let your wish be granted." In recognizing the faith of a Gentile woman, Jesus makes a hero out of an antihero in conventional wisdom. This is his trademark. He makes a hero of a Samaritan leper, a Samaritan woman, a tax collector Zaccheus, a blind beggar Bartimaeus and other marginalized characters. He turns our sense of privilege and entitlement on its head. He shakes us out of our comfort zone. He challenges us to cross new thresholds and boundaries in order to appreciate "the otherness" of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, In the light of the Scriptures today, we pledge to create an environment where fear of differences is replaced by encouraging all people to share their gifts. The default social system often turns us into rivals, but God calls us to a different way: working together, needing each other, being the body of Christ.

What do we do when God is silent to our prayers? The woman in the Gospel today made a good request. Her daughter was being oppressed by a demon, and she wanted Jesus to spare her of that suffering. That is a good desire; she's not asking for anything evil. Yet Scripture tells us, "But he did not say a word in answer to her." (Matt 15:23).

What do we do when God is silent to our prayers? The Gospel relates that the woman kept calling after Jesus. She kept making her prayer known. She was persistent. When God is silent to our prayers, we keep praying. Elsewhere in the Gospels, Jesus tells us, "Ask and you will receive. Seek, and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you." (Matt 7:7). Jesus encourages us to have persistence in prayer. Keep asking. Keep seeking. Keep knocking.

The Gospel shows us that two good things come from persistence in prayer. Humility and faith. By asking, and seeking, and knocking, we grow in humility and faith.

Without humility, we can't receive any of the other good things that God wants to give us. We can think of God's grace, what He wants to give us, like the rain that falls from the sky. Rain slides right down a steep hill, but it fills up a deep valley. In a similar way, God's grace slides right down the person puffed up with pride, but it fills the heart of one who lowers himself in humility.

Without having to persist in humble prayer, we might think that God simply owes us what we want, and in our pride, we would never receive what we truly need.

And what do we truly need? Faith. The second good thing. Persistence in prayer strengthens our

faith. Jesus responds to the woman, “O woman, great is your faith!” The silence of Jesus not only revealed the woman’s humility, it strengthened her faith. And what could be more valuable than faith? Faith is the path to salvation, to eternal communion with God, to perfect happiness.

The miracle of the healing of the daughter of the Canaanite woman was for the sake of faith. He used the miracle to arouse faith. Faith is Jesus’ goal. It’s more valuable than even our physical health because it is our path to heaven, to communion with God, to perfect happiness.

His love is never-ending. The cross shows us that in every moment, God wants to give Himself to us. So what do we do when God is silent to our prayers?

We trust that silence is not a break in His love for us; it is another moment of his love for us. And we keep praying. Through humility and faith, God is working the unseen miracle that is more valuable than even a physical healing. He is working our salvation.

Again, let us be careful not to deny others the mercy of God simply because we cannot yet see what God sees in them. The Canaanite woman in today’s Gospel embodies this truth.

She was an outsider, but she refused to allow her identity or society’s perception of her to become a barrier to God’s mercy. She persisted in faith until Jesus declared: “Woman, great is your faith!” Her faith broke the stereotype. For God’s door never closes on anyone who seeks His mercy.

God bless you, and Happy Sunday