

Oh, how good and pleasant it is,  
when brothers and sisters live together in unity!  
For there the Lord has ordained the blessing:  
life for evermore.

*Psalm 133:1,3*

I have good news – God listens to our prayers. We have had many prayers answered this month. It is good news.

God listens to everything we say. Everything... Which, at times, may not sound like good news.

I would like to highlight two particular natures of God – God listens and God’s goal for humanity is unity. First, God listens – God hears our prayers and sometimes answers them the way we want, but, God is always listening. Imagine it like this, children are sponges. They hear everything. Most often they don’t look like they are listening, or are interested, but they’re hearing everything you say. Ever had a child repeat back to you something that you didn’t think they heard? Yeah, they’re sponges; they’re always listening. To the children, you need to know this: your parents hear everything. Everything. Even when you don’t think they know, or hear, they do. That’s how it is with God. The Lord hears everything we say. Like a parent, it is God’s nature to do so.

The second nature of God is unity. The Genesis story today ends with unity of Jacob’s offspring. Joseph forgave his brothers; his brothers forgave him. *Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live in unity.* That is from today’s psalm and it says that unity *is life for evermore.* God’s main goal is unity among all people – unity with us and God, us and our families, our communities, and unity with the nations of the earth. I don’t mean that God wants everyone to agree or think the same thing about everything; no, that’s not unity. Unity is disagreeing but understanding we are united, connected, together. Unity is loving one another, even those we do not see eye-to-eye with. Jesus’ goal is unity. He sent us the Holy Spirit. The main sign of the Holy Spirit is unity. If you have every felt connected with someone, even without agreeing on everything, and especially when two people come from two different walks of life yet feel a connectedness, a brother and sisterly love for the other, that’s the Holy Spirit at work! It’s God’s nature for brothers and sisters to live in unity. Just like how you want your family to be in unity with one another, that’s God’s plan for all of humanity. It sounds really far away right now doesn’t it. It looks like humanity is divided. But, it’s God’s nature and God’s plan for all of humanity to be in unity.

In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus says that it is not what goes inside a person that defiles; what comes out of a person is what defiles. It sounds like to me that Jesus is talking about the things we say. He says that what comes out of us – our words – show the true intent of our heart. Then, it sounds like Jesus calls a particular woman, who is begging for her daughter to be healed, a dog. To me, that doesn't sound like something Jesus would mean to say nor does it show the intention of his heart.

I have been studying this particular Gospel passage off and on for about six years because I disagree with the common way this passage is interpreted. Theologians and scholars read it two ways: first, Jesus did not yet know, or realize, that his ministry and message included people outside of the Jewish faith tradition. The encounter with this woman opened Jesus' eyes to ministry to the Gentiles. The second category of opinions is this: Jesus was tired and had a human moment. Yet, his divinity shone through his tiredness. I don't like the first category because I think Jesus knew the extent of his mission and ministry from the beginning. The second sounds like we're making an excuse. Neither of them holds water for me.

This is what I have found and believe – God hears everything we say, good or bad, blessing or curse. God also sets up encounters so we can find unity with one another.

Matthew placed the first part of the Gospel lesson – about words that come out of us – as a prelude to the story of the Canaanite woman. It serves as a way to show what this woman had said previously about the Jewish people. She called them dogs. In her region, in her time, the Jewish people had a low station in society. During a time of famine or war, it is believed that the non-Jewish, more affluent people of that area, said words to the effect of “why would we take food that we would give to our children and give it to the dogs.” In other words, why would we help people of the Jewish faith.

The Canaanite woman felt empowered to speak directly to Jesus which tells me she considers herself to be on a pretty high rung on the societal ladder. When she addressed Jesus – Lord, Son of David – she used a title, but the wording was a little off. It's a clue to the reader that this is not her religious tradition. Next comes a troubling sentence: “Jesus did not answer her at all.” . There are three people who Jesus did not answer. One is King Herod Agrippa – the puppet king who traded in loyalty and protection for his people for greed and power from the Roman empire; he also had John the Baptizer murdered. Jesus was dragged in front of him but he said nothing to Herod. The second one is Pontus Pilate. At one point, Pilate yelled at him, “Don't you hear the testimony they bring against you!?!” But Jesus did not answer. (Mt 27:13-14) Jesus did not speak to them... or the Canaanite woman. Why did Jesus ignore her? Pilate did horrible things to the Jewish people in order to gain favor with Rome and get promoted out of Roman occupied Palestine. Herod subjected his people to unfair Roman rule, to put it mildly, for his own gain. And then this woman. Why is she on the same par as them?

God's ways are not our ways; God's thoughts are not our thoughts. If we take the Ten Commandments in order of importance, the first being the highest, #4 is honor your mother and your father; #5 is do not murder. My seminary ethics professor asserted that perhaps, in God's kingdom, dishonoring your parents is worse than murder. The first letter of John asserts, "Whoever hates his brother or sister is a murderer." (1 Jn 3:15) It is reasonable to think that the woman seeking Jesus' healing for her daughter may have held hate in her heart for the Jewish people. As such, Jesus had nothing to say to her.

Some of you, from time to time, may have felt like Jesus wasn't listening to you. I had a time, during a very difficult time in my previous parish, where I was praying to God but was not hearing an answer. One evening, driving home, alone in the car; just me and Jesus; I shouted, "Why aren't you answering me!?" Immediately, I had an answer that looked like the shape of an ear in the imagination part of my brain. It was like Jesus was saying to me, "I am speaking; you are not listening!" It's true, he was speaking, I just didn't want to listen to what he was saying.

Back to the Gospel lesson, the disciples urged Jesus to send her away. Jesus said – not sure to who – "I have been sent to the people of the House of Israel." In other words, the people of the Jewish faith. She got in front of Jesus, knelt down – so he would have to stop walking – and said "Lord, help me." The shortest prayer in the Bible – *Lord, help me*. In my mind's eye, I see Jesus bending down to her and speaking this phrase in her ear, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He used the very words she had used against the House of Israel; this time, it was used against her.

Can you imagine Jesus repeating to you the worst thing you've ever said?

One of my closest friends; we met in our sophomore year in college; several years after college he invited me and a couple of other friends for a visit. Once we were all together, he stepped into the coat closet and closed the door. Then he opened the closet door and walked out and said, "Ta da!" We hugged him and thanked him for telling us. He then said we were the people he was most nervous to tell. Taken aback, we asked why. He said, "Because I heard all your jokes in college."

Ouch.

Defensively we made excuses that began with "Had we known..." With tears in his eyes, he replied, "Regardless, you shouldn't have said those things anyway." Then, he forgave us.

*Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity.*

Back to our Gospel lesson, can you imagine Jesus repeating the worst thing you've ever said. Jesus said to her, *it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs*. The woman replied, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She humbled herself. She lowered herself to being a dog that sits under the master's table.

Not only did she humble herself, she also glorified Jesus. Referring to him as Master; but, more than that, the phrase, *crumbs that fall from the table*, means that something is as easy as brushing crumbs off the table. We would say *easy as pie* – which isn't all that easy – but in her day and time, they'd say: easy as brushing crumbs from the table. She lowered herself, she raised Jesus up as Master, and said: healing my daughter to you is as easy as brushing crumbs from the table.

In my mind's eye, I see Jesus taking her by the hand, standing her up from her kneeling position, and saying, "How GREAT is your faith! Your daughter, she is already healed."

Amen and alleluia! How great is your faith.

God's nature is to listen. Whatever this woman said about the House of Israel, God listened. Jesus repeated her words and, as a result, she humbled herself. Healing was a natural outpouring from that experience. God listens. God is also focused on unity. Two different people – Jesus and the Canaanite woman – two different walks of life, yet here, in unity. She in union with God and with her fellow brothers and sisters regardless of their religious affiliation and background; she let go of division among the people and found unity. And healing.

So, what can we do? Every week, except during the season of Easter, we have a corporate confession that follows our prayers. Like the pattern in today's Gospel lesson, we get Jesus' attention, we pray – Lord, help us – and then we ask for forgiveness. After the confession, we share the Peace of God with others, even with those whom we may disagree with from time to time. We share the peace and we participate in the unity that God has planned for all people. In our corporate confession, we ask forgiveness for the things we have done and left undone, and for things we have said and left unsaid. I suggest you let God know those things for which you have said that were against "the other", or a family member, or friend, or, heaven help us, against your parents. Let God know you are sorry. You will be forgiven.

God listens. God listens to your prayers, your confession, your contriteness and your praise. God strives for unity. Unity among the peoples might seem impossible in our day and time, but not to God. Think of it this way: gravity is really hard to do. But to God, it is as easy as brushing crumbs off the table. Right now, God is creating a brand-new galaxy. We're not sure why, but God is doing it. God is holding the planets in their courses and is keeping us in orbit around the sun. That seems impossible to us; but to God, it is crumbs falling from the table.

For the impossibility of unity in our world: even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.