

HOMILY for 20th SUNDAY in ORDINARY TIME – Year A

This Sunday's Gospel shares with us the story of how a woman interceded for her daughter & asked Jesus to heal her. As I reflected on that message, I'm reminded of this cute story I want to share with you.

Little Timmy had been misbehaving in Children's Church & was isolated from the other children for time-out. After a while he emerged & informed his teacher that he had thought it over & then prayed about it.

"That's wonderful," said his teacher. "If you ask God to help you not to misbehave, He will help you."

"Oh, I didn't ask Him that," said Timmy, "I asked Him to help you put up with me."

Anyway, prayer has been part of our human life since the beginning of Creation. People have come to God in prayer to ask for help with all kinds of things. They range from praying for mundane things like a divine blessing on the sacrificial offerings to asking for serious stuffs like deliverance from bondage & slavery. Surely everyone has come & ask God for help with something at some point in their lives. But, there's another form of prayer that this Sunday's Gospel wants to talk to us about, namely, Intercessory Prayer. We often come straight to God & ask for our own needs. However, we forget that we can pray on behalf of others as well. There're so many people who are in need of God's help & support. In fact, our world needs lots of prayers from us.

Evidently a foreign or Canaanite woman came to Jesus & cried out, "Lord, Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is terribly troubled by a demon." So, a foreign woman who heard about Jesus' miraculous power came to Him for help. But, she didn't ask it for herself. Rather, it was for her daughter. She used her connection & influence with Jesus to intercede for her daughter. Interestingly, Jesus reacted to her request by "giving her no word of response." I'm sure we could relate to it when we first call out in prayer. Our prayer often gets no response. It seems like God ignores our prayer. Let's see how the woman took it, "...She kept shouting after Him." I believe we should do the same whenever we feel that God does not respond to our prayer. We should shout after God until He listens to our prayers.

Jesus finally responded to the woman's request & said, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel... It's not right to take the food of sons & daughters & throw it to the dogs." If anyone gives that kind of response these days, that person would be in big trouble with our political-correctness culture. Jesus basically told the foreign woman that He was restricted by the social & cultural rules of the time & could not lend her a helping hand. But, the woman did not take that response as a personal insult. She was humble & persistent. She insisted with another request, "Please Lord, even the dogs eat the leavings that fall from their masters' tables." I can't believe she could humbly & calmly come up with that remarkable prayer. Most people would be yelling & screaming at the Lord or anyone who might have that narrow-mindedness. They would use the worse insults in return & keep the vicious circle going. Thankfully the woman took the high road & focused on getting help for her daughter instead. Her humble & persistent attitude paid off big time in the end. Here's how Jesus rewarded her, "Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass... [That very moment her daughter got better.]" So, after all those testy exchanges, the foreign woman finally got her prayer answered. Her daughter was healed.

There are a few spiritual lessons we could learn from her. First of all, our attitude in prayer plays a significant role whether God would answer our prayer or not. In spite of all the hurdles & rejection she might have felt from the Lord, she never got frustrated & gave up on her search for a spiritual solution for her daughter. Apparently her daughter was possessed by a demon & needed help. What this mother teaches us is the importance of being humble & persistent when we pray for our needs or the need of others. We often find ourselves being proud, angry, impatient, & impetuous. We demand God to grant our prayers right here & right now. We make God carry out our wishes the way we want. But, that's not the right attitude for our prayers to be answered. If the foreign woman had that attitude, she'd not hang around Jesus & have an intimate conversation with Him. Of course, she would not have her prayer answered, & her daughter would not be healed.

Secondly, I think we don't make use of Intercessory Prayer enough. We usually pray for our own needs. Or, we forget to pray altogether. We should look around us for countless needs & beg God on behalf of others. In fact, this past week a nurse at Grand Rapids Home for Veterans came up & asked me to pray for her brother who is a priest & an exorcist, but faces lots of pressure from the power of darkness & needs lots of prayers. Of course I've agreed to pray for him. I believe the reason our world has turned chaotic & faced so many problems like now is because people have become indifferent & careless about their neighbors. If everyone would pray for one another around the world a little more, we would have a much more caring & compassionate society. There would be less hatred & fighting, less greed & injustice. We'd see more miracles & solutions for our daily problems.

Finally, the fact that Jesus gradually opened to a request of a non-Jewish woman reveals to us that God loves all peoples. Our human culture & custom might separate one group from another & keep certain people from getting access to God's grace. Or, we might come up with rules to pitch one group against another instead of encouraging everyone to live in peace with one another. That's why the Jews did not have anything to do with the Canaanites. Or, the Shiites have fought & shunned the Sunnis for years in the Mideast. Or, St. Paul had to ask St. Peter who concentrated the early church's ministry only with the Jews to open it up to non-Jewish people like you & me. But, God always finds different ways to bring everyone together & help them experience the divine miracles & blessings.

My dear brothers & sisters, prayer is our connection to God & our lifeline on earth. This Sunday we're encouraged to use it on behalf of people around us. For that's how we'd invite God to break down all barriers in our human society & perform lots of great miracles for us. The best way for our prayers to be heard is for us to have a humble & persistent attitude.