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Archbishop Elpidophoros of America - Homily at the Divine Liturgy, Sunday of the Canaanite Woman



His Eminence Archbishop Elpidophoros of America

Greek Orthodox Cathedral of the Assumption

Denver, Colorado

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Beloved Brother, Metropolitan Isaiah,

Dear Sisters and Brothers in the Lord,

This visit to the Metropolis of Denver, with my beloved brother, Metropolitan Isaiah, and with the many clergy and faithful, has filled me with great hope and optimism for our Church. The past year has been perhaps the most difficult year in the hundred-year history of our Sacred Archdiocese. And yet, we persevere in our ministries, our fellowship and, above all, our worship.

If there was ever an example of such perseverance in the Gospel, it is the Canaanite Woman of whom we read of today. Her story is very much our story. Her need is very much our need. And the answer to her petition and her prayer is very much our answer.

In the other version of this story – in the Gospel of Saint Mark – the woman is called a “Greek,” Ἑλληνίς.” This detail has great importance, because it demonstrates that our Lord spoke Greek, which was the so-called lingua franca of the Mediterranean world in that age.

But though language was no barrier – and should never be a barrier to spiritual dialogue – there were walls between this nameless Canaanite Woman and our Lord Jesus Christ.

First was the fact that she was a woman. The Lord’s disciples were sensitive to any woman speaking with their Rabbi, unless she was a member of their fellowship.

Second, she was a Gentile – a Greek – and, therefore, might be ritually unclean. There was no way they wanted her near their Master and Lord.

And finally, she was causing a scene, crying out after the Lord, so much so, that the Disciples begged Him to get rid of her. This last detail is especially painful, because it still speaks to us today. We are all Gentiles, so that is of no concern. And the Church respects the position of women to a degree unknown in the ancient world – even though not all roles are open to all people. But it is this sense of embarrassment that the Disciples clearly felt, which can still ring true today.

In every parish and in every community, there is always someone who makes us uncomfortable. They either talk too much, or complain too loudly, or they simply don’t fit the image that we want to see in the Church – the image that we find personally satisfying and appropriate.

But, if we open our hearts with compassion and mercy, we can learn so much from these people! Just as the Disciples had much to learn from the Canaanite Woman.

For God has appointed them to be teachers in our midst.

First: Learn everyone's name. Because God knows the name, the identity and the story of every single person in the world. The Disciples just wanted to send the woman away. Imagine if one of them had inquired: "What's your name? What's your trouble? What's your story?" With just an ounce of compassion – like the faith of a grain of mustard seed – you can move mountains of sorrow, pain and suffering in others.

Think of your parish, your community. Do you know the names and stories of everyone else? What is holding you back? Consider, for just a moment, how much love you can unleash in this world, by a simple word of kindness, or by a thoughtful inquiry. It's hard to call someone a friend, when you don't even know their name.

Second, and of utmost significance for us in this time of the pandemic: The Woman would not be deterred. Her insistence on coming before the Lord Jesus – on her knees – is an example of courageous determination and the pure grit that should have been the real source of embarrassment to the Disciples.

In that moment, when she finally had the Lord's attention – and I suspect that of the Disciples as well – our Lord Jesus Christ put her to the test for all to see. He dismissed her petition, and, in so many words, called her a "dog." This is, indeed, very strong language.

But her reply, to the Lord of Heaven and Earth, is a master class of spiritual dialogue:

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

With this humble phrase, she bends the Ear of Heaven to her petition. With these few words, she elicits the Word of God to exclaim:

ὦ γύναι, μεγάλη σου ἡ πίστις!

O Woman, great is your faith!

The Disciples surely heard this! They had been previously called by their Lord: ὀλιγόπιστοι – "ye of little faith!" Perhaps, at this moment – in the presence of the woman they disregarded so much, that they had no interest in her name – they learned something of faith, patience, hope, persistence and, indeed, most of all, love.

For it was love – love for her daughter, love for another person – that brought the

Canaanite woman such strength of soul and heart, as not to rest until the Lord heard her cry.

My beloved Christians,

Let us come to know every member of our Church by their name and in their dignity as a child of God. Let us honor every name within our Church. Let us open our own hearts to learn from one another.

Let us, even in these difficult days of the pandemic, continue with persistence in our petitions to the God of all.

Let no one and nothing keep you from your Savior and Lord. Pray for yourselves, and pray for one another.

Now is the time when we draw near to the Triodion and to Holy and Great Lent.

With the courage and great faith of the Canaanite Woman, let us pray from the depths of our souls:

“Suffer us not to be separate from the One, Who is Three,

And let our cry come unto Thee.”

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