

“A Great Faith”

*She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”
Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith!” (Matthew 15:27-28).*

In the readings from the last two weeks, we watched Jesus operate in iconic ways. First, we witnessed the incredible compassion of Jesus as He healed the sick and then fed the masses with five loaves of bread and two fish. Last week, we observed the saving purpose and power of Jesus as He reached out His hand to a drowning disciple and pulled him out of the stormy water that threatened to take his life. Then, in the verses that open chapter 15 and link these famous stories with today’s reading, Jesus and His disciples are confronted by the Pharisees who proceed to question Jesus about their disregard for the “tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:2).

In the opening words of today’s text, Matthew tells us that “Jesus went away from there…” meaning that He left the site of His argument with the Pharisees and “withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon” (Matthew 15:21). Now, to understand today’s Gospel reading, it’s critical for us to know that the destination of Tyre and Sidon was clearly in Gentile territory. We don’t know if Jesus traveled there to escape the criticism of the Pharisees or to find relief from the demands of the crowds that continued to flock to him, but Matthew is careful to tell us that Jesus deliberately took His disciples to an unbelieving place where, almost immediately, He was approached by a woman in deep distress. Matthew writes, “And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, ‘Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.’” (Matthew 15:22).

In many ways this cry for help was no different from the cries He had heard back in Galilee. In fact, throughout the previous chapters in Matthew we find repeated accounts of Jesus willingly dealing with the sick and demon-possessed and, time after time, Jesus and His disciples provided relief and healing. And yet in this account, Jesus seems completely devoid of compassion. In fact, we are told that Jesus “did not answer her a word” (Matthew 15:23). This man who had just come from feeding 5,000 families and healing many sick people and driving out demons from countless others now refuses to even speak to this mother desperately seeking help for her daughter.

The lack of concern that Jesus shows her is shocking to us…but it didn’t shock the disciples. In fact, the disciples seem to pile on as Matthew tells us that they, “came and begged him, saying, ‘Send her away, for she is crying out after us.’” (Matthew 15:23). No compassion. No concern. Not one disciple speaks with empathy for the woman. Not one disciple questions the cold response of Jesus. As a group and to a man they affirm His indifference and then come to Jesus “begging” Him to turn away this pathetic pest. And according to the culture of these Jewish disciples, this response was completely understandably. You see, this woman was a Canaanite. She came from a pagan people outside of God’s covenant and, according to the Law, she was unclean. This woman and her people had been cursed by God (Deuteronomy 20:17) and in their way of thinking, she had no business associating with them or their Rabbi.

And so, in response to this question from His disciples, Jesus finally speaks and what He says seems to support their intolerance. Jesus said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” (Matthew 15:24). There it was. Jesus had spoken a definitive word that would have made perfect sense to the disciples and should have ended the debate with this woman and driven her away…*but she refused to leave!* And instead, she now comes to Jesus personally and kneels before Him in an embarrassing gesture of humility and for the second time appeals to Him for mercy with three simple yet profound words: “Lord, help me” (Matthew 15:25).

The first time she had approached Jesus, He greeted her plea with silence and now, He seems to take an even more aggressive position saying to the woman, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs” (Matthew 15:26). *Can you imagine the piecing impact of these words of rejection?* Not only did it

appear that Jesus wasn't about to help this woman's afflicted child, but He seems to add insult to injury by referring to her and her distressed daughter *as dogs!* If I were in this woman's place, I would've stormed off in disgust and rage...but this woman held her ground. She knew who Jesus was and she would not be deterred! In her opening appeal, she had not only called Jesus "Lord" but she had also identified Him with the language of the Messiah. The phrase "Son of David" was a title reserved by the prophets for the One from God who would sit on the throne of David and establish His Kingdom forever (II Samuel 7:13). We don't know how this woman came to know about Jesus, but the fact of the matter is that this woman had heard the promise of God and she believed!

Unlike the Pharisees – and at this point, even in contrast to even the disciples themselves – God had granted this woman the faith to believe in His promise that the Messiah would bring deliverance and she would not be dissuaded and she would not be deterred...*even by Jesus Himself!* And with a boldness that only faith can give, she looked Jesus straight in the eye and said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (Matthew 15:27).

Over the last couple of weeks, we have heard about some of the most well-known miracles in the Bible. "The Feeding of the 5,000" and "Jesus Walking on Water" serve as two of the most enduring examples of God's power at work and yet, today I would say that the miracle of faith displayed in this Canaanite woman is one of the most remarkable acts of God in all of Scripture. "*Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*" In this confession of faith, this unclean, outsider stakes everything on the promise of God! In this confession of sin, this woman with nothing to offer Jesus, clings to God's promise that He always gives good gifts. And with nothing but faith on which to stand, she will not relent and she will not give up and she persistently goes to the One place she knows help can be found.

My friends, this is a story we must hear because we all feel the desperation of this woman. There are times in our lives when we feel like God meets our prayers with silence. There are times in our lives when we feel alone and when we feel like no one understands our plight. There are times in our lives when we feel like our cries for relief are met by rejection...and in those times of desperation and temptation the miracle of faith is all we have. And, you see, this kind of faith cannot come from within. This kind of faith doesn't come from what we know or from what we have accomplished. This kind of faith is a gift from God. It is a crumb from the table. It is a lifeline based solely on God's promise to us in Jesus Christ and, as Paul tells us, in Christ, God's answer "is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him" (II Corinthians 1:19-20)...*even when our eyes and ears and hearts tell us something else!*

Luther commented on the faith of the Canaanite woman when he wrote: "She catches the Lord with his own words. Yes, still more, with the rights of a dog she gains the rights of a child. Now where will he go? He has caught himself and must help her. But know this well, he loves to be caught in this way. If we only had the (faith) of this woman to catch God in his own judgment and say, 'Yes, Lord, it is true, I am a sinner and not worthy of thy grace, but you have promised forgiveness and did not come to call the righteous, but...to save sinners.' Behold," Luther concludes, "the Lord must then through his own judgment, have mercy on us."

This woman faced silence. This woman faced rejection. And yet this woman answered the harsh judgment of Jesus by pointing to the promise of God that He Himself embodied. She recognized that with Jesus, there are no partial gifts. By faith, she knew that even the crumbs of the bread of life...*give life!* My friends, today this life has been given to you and the faith that receives even a crumb from Jesus...is indeed great. Amen.

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