

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminster, Massachusetts

Holding Fast to Christ

Matthew 15:21–28

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Eph 1:2

Like the Canaanite woman in St. Matthew's Gospel let us hold fast to our merciful Lord Jesus Christ and be strengthened by His final words to her, "**O woman, great is your faith, be it done for you as you desire**" (v 28).

In St. Matthew's Gospel, two Gentiles receive the highest praise from Jesus, the top marks among His followers.

The first is a Roman centurion with a sick servant. He confesses that he's unworthy of having the Lord enter his house. He also confesses that the Lord has authority simply to "**say the word**" and make his servant well. "**Such faith,**" Jesus says, "cannot even be found in Israel" (Matt 8:5–13).

The second is the Canaanite woman with the demon-possessed daughter in today's reading. She considers herself no better than a dog begging for scraps from the Lord's table. Despite Jesus' silence, even though He says that He's been sent "**only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,**" she persists in asking for His mercy (v 24). Her faith, Jesus says, is "**great**" (v 28).

Now compare these two Gentiles with what we heard last week: bold, courageous Peter climbing out of the boat to walk on water with Jesus, fearing the wind and the waves, sinking, and crying out for salvation. He's the leader of the apostles, a man ready to risk his life to follow Jesus, and the one who most clearly confesses Jesus to be the Messiah. Yet Jesus says to great Peter, "**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**" (Matt 14:31). In fact, all the disciples are rebuked by the Lord for their "little faith," and more than once.

So if we would learn to have great faith, then we should look not at the disciples but at this simple Gentile woman in need who holds fast to Jesus. For great faith—and here I speak not in the manner of the world but after the pattern of our Lord—great faith isn't measured by a person's accomplishments, plans, or pious words. It's not about stepping

out into uncharted waters or leaping anywhere. The Bible never talks about a “leap of faith.” More like the opposite. Faith itself has nothing to offer; it has nothing to boast about; it has nothing to show off. Faith isn’t a matter of the intellect gained by study. It shouldn’t be confused with our feelings. Faith isn’t a human achievement at all, as if a person is somehow able to get faith, to manufacture it, or to whip it up.

So where does faith come from, faith like that of the Canaanite woman? We heard in last week’s reading from Romans chapter 10: **“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ”** (Rom 10:17). A Christian is conceived through the ear and lives **“by every word that comes from the mouth of God”** (Matt 4:4). Somehow the Canaanite woman heard the good news of Jesus’ coming, of His mercy, help, and compassion for all. Faith sprang into her heart. It took hold of this word and preaching. It ran after Christ.

As your pastor, my call is to fill your ears with that word so that you are drawn to Christ. And the heart of the word is this: the announcement of Jesus’ coming, of His mercy, help, and compassion for you, so that you—just like this woman—**“call on the name of the Lord”** and receive His salvation (Rom 10:13).

For this is exactly what the woman did when faith took hold of her: she called to Jesus. Her voice was heard crying, **“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon”** (v 22). The Church still prays like this Canaanite woman. We still confess our unworthiness and appeal to the mercy of God alone. This is your prayer each Sunday. You cry those same familiar words: “Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy.” It means that we deserve nothing for which we pray, yet we ask everything of God “by grace.” Because He desires to **“have mercy on all”** (Rom 11:32)—on Jews and Gentiles, on men and women, even on the sinful and disobedient.

Do you believe all that? Do you still come and call out expecting the Lord Jesus Christ to have mercy on you? Do you hold fast to the promises given in Holy Baptism, to the forgiveness found in the absolution, to Christ’s words of institution? Do you cling to what you have heard preached about this Man, Jesus?

What sets the Canaanite woman apart is that she won’t let go of Jesus. No matter how silent, how unfeeling or uncaring He seems to be, she continues to trust in His mercy and goodness. She keeps on asking, praying, approaching with confidence.

When she first spoke to Him, Jesus certainly didn’t act in keeping with His reputation for mercy. Her pleas were received with silence. They seemed to fall on deaf ears. **“He**

didn't answer her a word" (v 23). Not one single word in reply, as if she had said nothing at all; as if she and her demon-possessed daughter didn't even exist. This Jesus was far different than she had expected, so cold and unfriendly, not at all kind and compassionate. She easily could have given up and gone home, believing that the word about Him was all untrue, setting the record straight for others as well. But she didn't. Instead, this woman ignored that she had experienced and held fast to the bare word of God. She didn't trust her eyes or her body but her ear. **Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it** (Lk 11:28), like this Canaanite woman. May God grant each of us such courage and faith in every time of need and especially in the hour of death.

The disciples ask Jesus to send her away. We don't know why. Did they mean "send her away with healing," thinking that Jesus would at least hear their prayers even if He ignored the woman herself? Or was it out of annoyance, wanting to be rid of her and stop her cries?

The Lord answered, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel"** (24). He claims that His mercy isn't for all, that it's limited in some way. He seems to exclude the whole Gentile world from His grace, despite what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah about **"the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord"** and the Lord gathering **"yet others"** besides Israel (Is 56:6, 8). It's a hard thing when the heart feels that God's word is true for others but not for me. Our feelings would often tell us to stop believing, to stop praying, to stop trusting in this Jesus.

But this Canaanite woman goes on. Such persistence! Such perseverance! Such confidence in the mercy and compassion of God when it seems most uncertain and untrue! She came yet again, knelt before Jesus, and said, **"Lord, help me"** (v 25), and she received the worst blow yet. Jesus answered, **"It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs"** (v 26). He calls her a dog. He says that she's unworthy to partake of the children's bread, a condemned and outcast person. What further hope can one have? What more is there to say or do except to leave with her tail between her legs?

But she doesn't. She doesn't despair or give up but agrees with His word: she is a dog and she wants no more than a dog's share—just the crumbs that fall from the table of the Lord. Yes, she's happy to be a begging dog who receives only the merest scraps of mercy, so long as they fall from Jesus. **"Then Jesus answered her, 'O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.' And her daughter was healed instantly"** (v 28). For now Jesus allows Himself to be trapped by His own words. He will be merciful.

The great faith of this Canaanite woman isn't simply a matter of persistence and perseverance, though we can learn from her to always pray and never lose heart. It's really about this same Jesus Christ, still merciful, still hearing our prayers, always faithful to His promises, despite what we often see and feel in our lives. It's about Him and holding fast to Him crucified and risen for us, to the word of our forgiveness, to His victory over death, to the hope of the resurrection. It's about sticking with our baptisms and knowing that our Lord truly gives us more than crumbs, no matter how small the bread we eat. However else it may seem that He responds to our prayers, to the cry of "Lord, have mercy," we have the most certain reply in the words of Jesus. From this altar, our Lord pours out His mercy and feeds us—"Take, eat, My body. Take, drink, My blood." And here we have again our merciful Jesus.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

*Revised from a sermon preached at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana,
for the Ninth Sunday of Pentecost, August 14, 2011.*