

The Second Sunday in Martyrs' Tide, August 20, 2023

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The Canaanite Woman's Great Faith

Matthew 15:21–28

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

Eph 1:2

[Jesus] answered, "It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." [The Canaanite woman] said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly. (vv 26–28)

Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire (v 28). Of all the words that Jesus speaks in the Gospels, these are the ones we would most like to hear spoken about us. Wouldn't we all love to hear *this*, "Great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire"? To be praised by Jesus for our faith!

Our desire to be praised goes hand-in-hand with another idea. It's not a right idea, but it's one that we often have. It's the idea that if we just have enough faith, then Jesus will listen to us and give us whatever we ask. If only we have that "great faith," then Jesus will heal our sicknesses, raise our dead, provide our daily bread, and so on. Be careful! Jesus never makes that promise to us.

Of course, Scripture also has many examples of people who are *not* praised for having great faith. Instead, they are rebuked. Just last Sunday we heard about Peter walking on water to Jesus . . . and sinking. Jesus said, "**O you of little faith, why did you doubt?**" (Mt 14:31). And it wasn't the first time or the last time He would say that to the disciples. Even after Jesus rose from the dead, **when they saw Him they worshiped Him, but some doubted** (Mt 28:17). Great faith? Little faith!

I wonder if the disciples were a little bit jealous of this Canaanite woman. What do we have to do to have great faith? Or maybe, like you, they wondered and worried about why their faith isn't greater than it is.

In fact, the Canaanite woman is one of only two people to receive such high praise from Jesus. Surprisingly, both are Gentiles. The other is a Roman centurion who believed that

Jesus could heal his sick servant simply by the power of His word. He trusts in Jesus and in the power and effectiveness of what Jesus says. Great faith is a rare gift!

So what makes the Canaanite woman's faith so great? How do we think of it?

First, Jesus is the one who calls her faith great. This Canaanite woman doesn't call her own faith great. In fact, she doesn't say anything about her faith. She didn't come up to Jesus saying, "Now, Lord, I have a really great faith. Look at me. You really should help me. I deserve it, you know, for my great faith." That would probably be the last thing she would do. I'm not sure that she would even know whether her faith was great or little! She doesn't treat her faith as a work or something of merit. Nor does she say to herself or to others, "If I just believe enough, I'll receive whatever I ask for." She isn't trying to impress Jesus, flatter Him, gain favor with Him, or earn His attention. Not in the way that we so often try to do with people! The Canaanite woman doesn't have faith in herself. Take note of this. She isn't looking at herself. Where is her focus? Her focus is on Jesus and on her daughter's need. She isn't looking in a mirror and wondering how great her faith is that day. She's looking at her daughter who is demon possessed and looking at Jesus, calling out to Him for help.

Second, we know where all true faith comes from. As we heard last Sunday, "**Faith comes from hearing, and hearing from the word of Christ**" (Rom 10:17). This isn't just the case sometimes. This is always the case. Faith comes by hearing, the faith of the apostles, the faith of this woman, your faith as well. Through the word of Christ, the Holy Spirit works faith as it pleases Him. We don't know when she heard, or where, or from whom. But we do know that she did. She heard and believed. Maybe it was at the local market. Maybe she heard about Jesus while eavesdropping on someone else's conversation. Somehow it got to her and she believed it!

What do we do if we think that our faith is small? What do we do when we look at ourselves in the mirror and see that our faith isn't what we want it to be? Hear! Hear the word of God! The answer's not to turn inward or to look more closely in the mirror. The answer is to look at Jesus and hear Him.

And just what does this Canaanite woman believe? She believes certain things about Jesus. This is key. It's not just faith in general that matters. It's faith in Him. We see this in the way she addresses Him, in the prayer that she makes: "**Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon**" (v 22). What does that tell us? She believes that Jesus is full of mercy. She believes that Jesus is her Lord. She believes that Jesus is the Son of David, descended from David and so the rightful ruler and Savior of Israel, promised from long ago. She believes that Jesus has

the power and desire to heal and restore the sick. She believes that His mission extends beyond Israel even to Gentiles like her.

All these things that she believes find their focus ultimately in Jesus death on the cross and His glorious resurrection. On the cross, we see His mercy in full. We claim Him as our Lord. The Son of David is crucified. By His dying and bleeding, He provides help and rescue for all in their time of need. And there He stretches out His arms, not just to grab the children of Israel but to gather the entire world under His wings, including you.

So what do you believe about Jesus? What do you believe about His work? What do you believe from the Scriptures? For this woman, what mattered wasn't what she found in herself but what she found outside of herself.

None of this means that she gets royal treatment from Jesus. Her great faith doesn't earn her an immediate answer to her prayers. In fact, her faith becomes great through the affliction she undergoes. It's only eight verses in the Gospel reading, but eight verses filled with drama. Martin Luther once said that a theologian is made by three things: by prayer, by meditation, and by something the Germans call *Anfechtung*—which roughly translates as suffering, trials, temptation, and affliction. I don't mind the part about prayer and meditation, but I'd rather not have *Anfechtung*, by trial and suffering. Yet it seems that where there is no affliction, no suffering, faith will *never* be great. Great faith becomes great because of what it undergoes—as it gets purified, forged, and tempered.

So it was for this woman. Think about what she went through.

First, she asks for mercy, literally comes begging for it. **“Have mercy on me, O Lord.”** And what does she get? A big-fat nothing burger. Jesus **didn't** even **answer her a word** (v 23). Not. One. Word. Silence. That can be a killer. Sometimes we experience it too. What, doesn't He hear? Is He preoccupied? Mad at me? Rude? What gives?

That would be hard enough if the disciples weren't trying to get rid of her. If she had someone else to support her and be her advocate. But they just want to get rid of her. Ouch! How's that for a reception? Jesus had just dismissed the crowds after satisfying them with fish and bread. But her? Send her away with nothing! I will say that we ought to think about how we receive people among us here at Our Savior. Are we like the apostles, wishing that people would just go away? Or do we welcome them with joy? How do we speak to and about them? I don't just mean new people. I mean people you haven't seen in awhile or those who aren't your particular friends. Would you send them away with nothing?

Then Jesus says that **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”** (v 24). The implication is clear—the Gentile woman and her daughter *aren't* included. That may sound strange, but it clearly express the primary focus of His earthly ministry. It was on the people of Israel, not the surrounding nations. That will change in Acts. Paul, Peter, and others will we sent abroad to distant peoples and far lands. Not so much Jesus.

So that sounds like three strikes. Jesus says nothing. The disciples want to send her away. And then Jesus makes clear that He came for the people of Israel, not for Canaanites like her.

Still, she doesn't go away. What a woman! What a dogged determination she has. She presses on: **“Lord, help me”** (v 25). That's when the worst comes: **“It isn't right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs”** (v 26). By which He's saying that this Canaanite woman is a dog, not like your pooch at home. The children's bread is meant for the children. You don't give dogs what is holy (Mt 7:6). It's not right. The people of Israel are the children; everyone else are the dogs.

And the woman says, “Amen! You're right.” But she's found a little opening in His argument, a little chink in His armor. Our Lord knows that it's there. He wants it there—for her and for us. For her faith to grow even greater. So, what about those dogs? Why, **even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the masters' table** (v 27). She's like a little puppy with big eyes on her master. She won't go away, not without something, not without table scraps or leftovers or a bone to gnaw. And she doesn't.

Think about what she went through to get there. What have you gone through? What are the things you ask Jesus for and you seem to get silence or a know or dismissed? What are the trials that you have to endure? Because that's where faith grows. Not by looking at yourself but by turning and looking to Him. Would you be content, would I be content, if all I got were scraps from my master's table? Oh, it sure would! You better believe that the scraps which fall from His table are like nothing you've ever seen before.

We know what Satan desires through suffering and testing. Satan desires to drive us off from Jesus, to create a wall, to put a wedge between us and our Lord. But our God is working through such things as well. He is working to bring us closer, and closer still. God doesn't tempt us, but He does strengthen us through testing. So endure, dear friends. Endure even when it seems that you are suffering slights and insults. Endure as you look at this Canaanite woman, seeing how she hounds our Lord and won't go

away. And, after all, what do we think we are? Do we really deserve better than this? Are we greater than this Canaanite woman. Didn't we just confess to being poor, pitiful sinners, yet now we think we're something special. But we are! Our Lord is pleased to give us more than scraps. He desires to give us the whole load. Here we are, and the Lord has the table set. What has He put on the table for us? To the world, it may not look like much, but from the mouth of our Lord we know what it is: "This is My body. This is My blood. Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." Is that enough for you today? Enough from your master's table? From His sacrifice on the cross?

It seems like the disciples have a mentality that says there's not enough Jesus to go around. We get Him, not you. Only enough for the children. But then, in the feeding of the 5,000, when they all ate and were satisfied from five loaves and two fish. How many baskets were left over? Twelve! Enough for all Israel. And with the feeding of the 4,000 in Gentile territory later, how many? Seven! Enough for the surrounding Gentile nations. Still, the disciples think there's a competition. If you get something good from Jesus, then I won't. As if there's a competition for Christ, for His attention, for His mercy, for what falls from His table. There is no competition. There is no scarcity with our Lord.

Grace isn't like that! Our Lord Jesus Christ is a true man, and He's also true God. Because He's true God, He can do what only God can do. He can provide enough—way for than enough—for all.

"Be it done for you as you believe." It's like Genesis all over again. Let there be light. And there was light. Let there be healing for this woman's daughter, and her daughter is healed. Let there be life and forgiveness and salvation. And there it is. For you. And it is very good. And it is enough?

So what is it about her faith? It's all about her Jesus! Faith is what Jesus gives and draws out of her through the trial she faces. He does the same for us, though it's painful and we often don't see it happening. She receives Him by faith alone. You receive from Him as well, whether faith is the little faith of the apostles or the great faith of this Canaanite woman, you receive what Jesus gives. Take Him at His word. More than just the crumbs. The whole Jesus with all His saving gifts and all His promises.

Yes, great is her faith, but greater still is her Jesus and your Jesus.

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

Phil 4:7
