

August 20, 2023
Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost
St. Timothy Lutheran Church – Huber Heights, OH
Pastor Joel Sutton

Matthew 15:21–28

GREAT FAITH KNOWS WHO JESUS IS AND BELIEVES HE HAS SOMETHING FOR YOU.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The story of the great faith of the Canaanite woman is not a parable but an actual event that happened at a specific time and exact place in history. The Holy Spirit inspired St Matthew to record this event so that you would know that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, and that nothing would deter you from calling upon His name, praying to God to have mercy on you in whatever your situation – even when it seems He has already answered “*no*” to your prayer.

Today’s text is a lot like life. You can come up with a lot of questions about what's really going on – and you won’t find the answers. Why is Jesus silent and appear to completely ignore the woman? Why do the disciples treat the woman as they do? Does Jesus intend to insult her? Does she feel insulted?

Just like life, we’re not given the answers. Why does it seem that Jesus ignores your cries for mercy? Why does He give you the silent treatment? Why do you struggle and suffer so much more than others? When will our culture return to the way it was 50 years ago, or even just 10 years ago? When will all the wars in the world be over? When will the fighting within your family be over? And the list of questions goes on. There are lots of questions – and Scripture doesn’t always give us the answers. The only real answer we find in today’s text is: What does great faith believe about Jesus?

Today’s text is the exact opposite of last week’s where we heard about Jesus walking on the water. He called Peter, one of His closest disciples, onto the water. But Peter took His eyes off Jesus and began to sink. Jesus said to him:

“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” (Matthew 14:31)

In contrast, in today’s text, we hear Jesus commend the Canaanite woman, saying:

“O woman, great is your faith!” (Matthew 15:28)

Her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. Both mother and child are suffering miserably. The mother hears that Jesus is nearby and she goes out to Him crying:

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” (Matthew 15:22)

The boldness of the woman’s is rather shocking.

- First, she is a woman speaking to man in public, something forbidden in that culture.
- Second, she is a Gentile whom the Jews would have nothing to do with.
- Third, even worse than being a Gentile, she is a Canaanite, an idolatrous people who were enemies of God's people in the promised land whom God commanded the children of Israel to completely exterminate. (cf: Deuteronomy 20:17) But they didn't.

Despite having everything going against her, she has great faith in Jesus. She knows exactly who He is before she cries out to Him. It's God's prerogative to create faith whenever and wherever He wills. Somewhere, she had heard of Jesus and His Word – and the Holy Spirit created faith in her heart. How do we know? In Matthew's Gospel, with exception of Judas who addresses Jesus as "**Rabbi**" both in the upper room and in the Garden of Gethsemane, it is only Jesus' disciples that address Him as "**Lord**," (cf: Matthew 26:25, 49; Gibbs, Matthew 1:1–11:1, Concordia Commentary, 430) Three times during this short encounter the woman addresses Jesus as "**Lord**." It is a word that comes from faith.

And even greater than that, she refers to Jesus as "**Son of David**," which in those days means she is referring to Him as the long foretold of Messiah who was to come. The One whom God promised in the Garden of Eden who would be born of woman to crush the head of the serpent. (cf: Genesis 3:15) The Canaanite woman came to Jesus in faith, knowing that He **alone** has saving power. He **alone** has power over the demons and the devil. As a mother in anguish, she cries out for mercy to the only One who can save her daughter.

At a quick glance, the event seems to be a stalemate. It appears that Jesus ignores her. He doesn't answer her a word. His disciples get annoyed with her crying and tell Jesus to send her away. When Jesus does finally say something, He responds that He was sent only lost sheep of the house of Israel. Why is He acting this way?

The woman deserves nothing – but she doesn't give up. Silence, rejection, and exclusion will not deter her from begging for mercy, even when it seems like Jesus has already said "no" to her prayer. It's a heartbreaking scene. She kneels before Jesus and begs, saying:

"Lord, help me." (Matthew 15:25)

As we hear in nearly every other Bible story, the compassionate Jesus will surely do something now. Right? But no. He tells the woman:

"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." (Matthew 15:26)

As if Jesus were saying: "*My mercy and service is for the children of Israel. It's not right to give Israel's mercy and service to you Gentile dogs.*" It sounds like an insult. Who among us would take Jesus' answer as anything else? It would have cut off any glimmer of hope and driven you and me off into despair. But this woman has great faith – and great faith knows and believes who Jesus really is. She doesn't argue with Jesus – but – she has great faith in Him. She **agrees** with Him, saying:

"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." (Matthew 15:27)

What does the woman's great faith believe about Jesus? **First**, she believes who He really is. She believes Him to be **Lord**. She knows that He is the **Son of David**, Israel's **Messiah** and that God is keeping His promise by sending Him into the world. **Secondly**, she knows that Jesus has something **for her** – even if only crumbs. In her reply to what sounded like Him calling her a Gentile dog, she agrees with Jesus as if she were saying:

“Yes, Lord, I know you're right. It's not right to take the children's bread to give it to the dogs. Yet even as the children eat and the crumbs fall from the table the Master's dogs also eat the crumbs. And that's all I need. The bread of Israel's Lord and Messiah is so rich and filling and gracious, the crumbs are all that I need. I know that there is something here for me.”

Jesus commends the woman for her faith and her daughter was healed at that instant. It is God given faith in the one who pours out grace upon grace so that she is not longer a pagan Gentile dog but child of the heavenly Father and member of His holy kingdom.

Today's Gospel text is an obscure story but illustrates genuine faith in Christ Jesus. The Holy Spirit inspired St Matthew to record it so that you would trust and believe in Jesus and His promises so that nothing would deter you from calling upon and praying to Him to have mercy on you in whatever your situation – even when it seems He has already answered “no” to your prayer.

You are nothing but a beggar before Jesus. You deserve nothing but eternal damnation. But God planted great faith within you in either the waters of Holy Baptism or in the preaching of the Gospel. It is faith that Jesus is the Christ, the One who was promised to come – and has entered creation to save you, a poor miserable sinner from the power of sin, death, and the grave. He shows His love for you in that while you were still a sinner, Christ died for you. (cf: Romans 5:8) And more than that, He was raised and is at the right hand of God and is interceding for you before the Father. (cf: Romans 8:34) This faith believes that your sins are pardoned for Christ's sake:

“whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.”
(Romans 3:25)

“Through him [you] have also obtained access by faith into this grace...”
(Romans 5:2)

But the devil is quick to attack your faith with trials and tribulations. He wants you believe that God has abandoned you. He assaults your body with sickness and pain. He invades your conscience, telling you that you aren't worthy of God's time and effort... that He's busy with those who are worthy... more pious and holy... that you have doubted Him too many times... that you are too far gone for redemption and answers to prayer.

The great faith of the Canaanite woman teaches us that whether our Lord God answers your prayers quickly or keeps you waiting a long time, you shouldn't let up, but firmly believe that He will one day, answer your prayer. In a sermon on our text, Martin Luther points to Joseph in the Old Testament whose brothers hated him as an example of how we should pray. Bear with me as I read a couple paragraphs from Luther where he writes:

Joseph cried and continued to pray God to help him. But the longer, the worse; the more he prayed, the worse he fared. To this day this is what happens to Christians. When they have called and cried for a long time to God, they feel no improvement, but things grow worse, as they did with Joseph. If God had liberated Joseph, Jacob, his father, would no doubt have been glad; but Joseph would have remained a shepherd. However, since the help was delayed so long, he became a lord over all Egypt, so that certainly no greater man can be found in Holy Scripture, no one who rose higher as world ruler than did Joseph.

Thus God still intends to deal with us. After He has denied us our petition for a long while and always said no, but we firmly cling to the yes, it shall finally be yes, and not no, for His Word will not lie: "Whatsoever ye shall ask of the Father in My name, He will give it you" (John 15:16). But our reason is highly offended at this delay and would gladly have God answer us promptly. So it is necessary not to be offended. Let our Lord God say no and suspend the answer of our petition for a year, two years, three years, or longer still, and let us only watch that hope and faith in His promise are not torn from our heart. Something will come of our prayer in the end, and God will give far more than we asked Him to give. (Plass, What Luther Says, 3483)

What does great faith believe about Jesus? It believes that Christ Jesus loved you unto death on the cross. He is risen from the dead and at the right hand of God interceding for you. He adopted you in Baptism, and like the Canaanite woman, He has something for you. It might be a heavy cross to bear or a great testing of your faith. But He is the Lord. The Son of David who comes to you right here personally in Word and Sacrament, to forgive your sins, strengthen your faith, and to preserve you in body and soul unto life everlasting. He gives you His peace:

"Not as the world gives [does He] give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (John 14:27)

Great faith knows who Jesus is and believes that He has something for you. He made you a promise on the cross when He said:

"It is finished." (John 19:30)

He made you a promise in Baptism where He marked you with the sign of the cross as one redeemed by Christ the crucified, and called you His own. He has for you: forgiveness of sins, life, and eternal salvation. He has a purpose for your living and will use for your suffering for your good and His glory. And one day there will be full healing with Him in eternity.

Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understand, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus,
Amen.