

Pastor's Message – 8/20/23
Matthew 15:(10-20) 21-28

Faith can be beautiful. It can move mountains and it can move people to great acts of courage, such as that of the Canaanite woman. Sometimes it grows from desperation after all other options have failed. Perhaps the woman in our story today had already done all the things people in her time and place usually did in circumstances such as hers. All failed, so she finally tried Jesus. Jesus may have been her last option, which may not indicate such great faith, but certainly suggested great courage.

We have two parts of our Bible reading today. The first story (10-20) talks about the Jewish views on unclean hands, food and words. The second (21-28) records an encounter between Jesus, the disciples, and an unclean woman (a Canaanite woman) whose daughter had an unclean spirit (a demon). The second story illustrates the challenges raised by the first, but taken up by several notches, especially when the unclean mother of an unclean girl refuses to be dismissed even by very harsh words reflecting Jesus' own sense of calling to offer ministry for the Jewish people exclusively.

Jesus and his disciples had left Galilee and went north to the region of Tyre and Sidon (verse 15), the Riviera of the Eastern Mediterranean. They were, in essence, on vacation, taking a pause from their extended preaching and teaching mission for some R and R. They're on vacation, and Jesus doesn't seem to want to be bothered.

They had tried to get away from people when they were in Nazareth, but everybody had followed and Jesus ended up having to serve supper to 5000 people. Jesus then sent his disciples back across the lake and had found a few minutes alone on the mountain to pray; but as soon as he came down from the mountain, he was back at the work of healing and saving in the form of rescuing his own disciples from the stormy sea and trying to teach them to have a little faith in him.

This time Jesus and his crew had gone clear out of the country to get away from the Jewish authorities who had troubled him, and the crowds who were following him, and the terrible enemies who had gotten John the Baptist beheaded.

So when a local woman (not Jewish) comes begging him to come help her demon-possessed daughter, we can imagine Jesus not to be all that interested. He didn't even heal everyone in Israel, let alone anyone outside of Israel. But then Jesus takes it a step further. He says why he's not interested.

The Canaanite woman pleads with Jesus, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." She addresses him as the Messiah; she knows exactly who he is, something that even the disciples were not yet clear about. She yells, "My daughter is tormented by a demon."

Jesus ignores her: "...he gave her no reply, not even a word." But he must have known that his little vacation was over. The disciples urge him to send her away because she won't stop her pestering. Jesus finally speaks: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

Jesus is in foreign territory, and an "unclean foreigner" approaches him. The fact that she is a woman compounds the dilemma for Jesus. Jewish men were not allowed by the Law to speak to women in public, even members of their own families, lest they risk making themselves unclean. After all that they have been through recently, when Jesus makes the comment that his ministry is directed only to "the house of Israel" (v. 24), the disciples are probably thinking, "Exactly."

The woman is not deterred by this. She comes and kneels at his feet, the proper deferential position for a woman in this time and place. And she pleads with him, "Lord, help me."

Jesus responds in a manner that seems uncharacteristically harsh. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This is a sharp rebuke. To suggest that someone is like a dog is not a compliment.

She will not be dismissed so easily. She persists, looking for any opening at all. When she finds one in his dismissive and actually insulting reference to the Gentiles as dogs, she has what she needs to prevail. "But even dogs are allowed to eat the scraps that fall beneath their masters' table."

Her persistence changes everything—and not only for her. It also changes everything for Jesus. His mission, from this point forward, does begin to include Gentiles, intentionally. The next time we see Jesus, he is teaching, healing and feeding a mixed crowd of Jewish and

Gentile people alike in northern Galilee (Matthew 15:29-39). No wonder the Pharisees, when they catch up to him (16:1), ask for a sign from heaven to justify his radical, Gentile-including behavior!

Sometimes it is good for us to remember just how it is that Christianity came to be passed down to non-Jews -- Gentiles—that is, to us, to you and me. Because sometimes we find ourselves forgetting that it is, by the Amazing Grace of God, that we are blest. After all, Jesus was a Jew; that is, he was born Jewish, raised Jewish, and sent by God to be the Messiah to the Jewish people.

Let us not forget that the Jewish people were God's first choice. The original plan was to save the Jews. The teachings of Jesus were spoken to Jewish people. The reason he was born was to bring the good news to the Jews. So that means that all of us Gentiles, when we go asking for God's blessing in the name of Jesus, are like this Canaanite woman in the end. We are really only entitled to the leftover crumbs that have fallen on the floor. We are a second choice, and if we find God's blessing, it is because of the Amazing Grace of God.

It is good for us to remember this sometimes, to remember that we live on the margin of God's grace, so to speak, saved not because we are God's chosen people, but because, as Jesus shows clearly in this story, we are blest. We are blest by a God with a soft heart. We're blest by a God who does change his mind.

Too often we forget God's grace and forget our place in the scheme of God's purposes. Too often we forget to practice either the humility or the persistence of the Canaanite woman. The main thrust of too many lives is an overemphasis on feeling good instead of doing good. The main focus of too many lives is based on self-interest and the attitude of what's in it for me. What do I get out of it? The woman's focus was on Jesus and on her daughter.

The Canaanite woman expressed humility and persistence and maybe when we put aside our self-centered attitudes and fall on our knees, it is then that we catch God's notice. Maybe when we come before God with penitent hearts and humble attitudes, God pays attention. Maybe when we approach God's Table with only a hope for some crumbs left underneath, it is then that God is willing to overlook the fact that we are not the chosen ones, but only the descendants of Gentiles.

Remember how Jesus responded, in the end, to that Canaanite woman who refused to go away, but only knew how desperately she needed Jesus's help. He didn't ignore her because she was not one of his own family. In the end, he changed his mind about her. He gave in. He responded to her humble spirit. "O woman! You have great faith! Let it be as you want it. Let your daughter be healed. Let her be free of her demon, free of the destructive behavior, free of the pattern that has ruined her life up to now." And no sooner had Jesus spoken then, by the power of God, the woman's daughter was healed.

In the pantheon of heroes of the Christian faith, the Canaanite woman doesn't even make the list. But she should, for this woman changed Jesus' mind. The odds were stacked against her. She was a foreigner, she was a woman, she was without a man (at least in the moment the story takes place), and she has a possessed child. You can't get much lower on the social status ladder of the first century than this Canaanite woman! Yet she audaciously calls out to Jesus, "Have mercy!"

She encourages us to have an audacious and yet humble nature – to acknowledge that blessings and grace are a gift, not what we are owed or what we earn. She encourages us to come to Jesus with our needs, but also to reach beyond ourselves to others. She teaches us that it is in humility and persistence – in faith – that God comes to us and that, in our humility and persistence, we are not disappointed.

Johnny, a first-grader, always waited on the front steps of the school after classes. The routine was that his father would be waiting in the car at the curb when the school day was over. This system worked perfectly, until the day Dad completely forgot to come. An hour later, in a panic, he drove to the school, fearing the worst. There was Johnny, waiting patiently on the step. His father asked, incredulously, "Didn't you worry I might not come?" Said the child, transparently, "No. I knew you would. Because you promised. And because you always come." Great was his faith.