

A Great Faith

p15 Yr A August 16, 2020 Matthew 15:21-28
Rev. Peter Smith www.stjamesuc.com

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. (Matthew 15:28) The final verse of our gospel lesson is clear, direct, and exactly what we expect Jesus to say. Which is important because the rest of the story is confusing, unsettling, and Jesus' other words are more than a little disturbing. Yet through the verse where Jesus praises the woman's faith and heals her daughter, I think we can actually hear what is happening in this encounter between Jesus and the unnamed woman in need.

A woman standing off at a distance calls to Jesus "Have mercy on me Lord, son of David, my daughter is tormented." But Jesus doesn't answer her. And that seems wrong. After all Jesus heals the sick and shows mercy and compassion to so many. He reaches out to those in need and demonstrates God's grace and love. But here Jesus ignores the woman's plea. And if that isn't bad enough the disciples tell Jesus to send her away because she is a bother.

Now to be fair there are other places in the gospels where the disciples want to send someone away that Jesus welcomes and places where Jesus doesn't immediately answer a plea for help. But here the situation is a bit more complicated and it has to do with the woman and her relationship to God's people.

The woman is a Canaanite which means she isn't one of the people of Israel. She lives outside the law and the covenant God made with the people. And that actually makes what she says to Jesus that much more curious. Because she calls him Son of David and that is a title which is important to the Jews because of course the promised Messiah they are waiting for will be a descendant of King David. But the woman isn't one of the people within that promise. She is an outsider from a different land with different beliefs and practices and she worships idols. But remember what she calls Jesus because that is going to make a difference in this confusing conversation she has with him.

Jesus answers the woman's plea after the disciples tell Jesus to send her away. He says "I have been sent to find the lost sheep of the house of Israel" in other words he is there as the Jewish Messiah to find the people who have strayed from the covenant made with their ancestors. And quite honestly that doesn't include her. But I don't think Jesus is telling her to go away.

Because Jesus talks to the woman after the disciples want her sent away. And so he has the attention of his followers in this exchange. And that isn't a minor point but something that is at the heart of the story. The disciples assume that everyone from outside Israel is outside the promise of God so the woman in need is unclean, unwanted, and beneath their notice. Yet Jesus talks to her.

And how he talks to her is important. He doesn't order her away he speaks to her directly. He raises the problem of her being outside the promises of God. And then he does something unexpected. He listens to her. For this isn't a pronouncement from Jesus not to be questioned but rather the opening of a conversation. For as soon as Jesus answers the woman by saying he has only come for the lost of Israel she approaches him.

She kneels before him and repeats her request. But notice the change in how she asks. The first time she asks him as the Son of David for help but the second time she just says "Lord, help me." Now maybe she is simply repeating her plea but perhaps she is actually setting aside the question of whether or not she deserves his help and simply asks for it. She appeals to Jesus not because she is worthy but because she is in need. But that still isn't enough.

Jesus pushes a bit more. "It is not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs." That sounds harsh to our ears and let's be honest it is. And if we didn't know where this story was going we might hear Jesus denouncing her or dismissing her. But I think this is actually a continuation of the conversation that Jesus is having with her that the disciples are watching. He has come to the children of Israel and in the understanding of the disciples, and perhaps the woman herself, she is unclean like a dog. So why should Jesus deal with her request?

And I know that isn't how we ever expect to hear Jesus talk to anyone in need especially nor a mother begging for her child. But let's hold in mind that in one more verse Jesus is going to praise the woman's great faith and heal her daughter. Because at this point I expect the disciples are nodding in agreement when Jesus speaks to her about giving the children's bread to the dogs. After all what right does the woman have to God's mercy and grace as someone outside the law and promises?

And before we completely denounce the disciples for their narrow views let's take an honest look at our own biases and expectation when it comes to God's love and grace. Yes, we are open to the idea of people of faith returning after they stray. We're fine

with finding the lost sheep. But what about the people outside of what we think is right and good who call on God? Do we assume they only do it because they are in need and they don't really have faith? Do we think that their faith is not nearly as good as ours since we understand and they don't? I'd like to say even within a church as open as ours we would welcome everyone but honestly that isn't so. We struggle to see how people so different from us, with different political views, ideas of morality, even practices of faith can fall under God's grace. So we're with the disciples listening to this exchange. For we wonder about wasting the bread of heaven too.

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” The woman's answer is wonderful because she uses the image Jesus uses to turn things around. Certainly no one would suggest taking food from children to give to the dogs. But no one would begrudge the dogs the extras which are unwanted and unused by the children. After all if we aren't going to use it or don't need it why shouldn't another have it?

"Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly. And we're back at that critical verse which focuses on the woman's faith. Because notice what Jesus says. He doesn't say “okay you've convinced me” or even “you are starting to have faith.” No Jesus says “great is your faith.” For the woman hopes she can receive God's mercy and love. She believes even though the disciples want her sent away empty handed. She refuses to accept that she is unworthy of grace and mercy and love and by doing that, by coming and pushing she receives.

Personally, I think that Jesus is going to heal her daughter all along. But he needs the Canaanite woman and the disciples to understand why. He needs her faith to grow so that she comes not as someone who knows the words to say by calling him Son of David but as someone who asks directly for herself. He also needs the faith of the disciples to grow so that they can see that the grace of God isn't simply for them but for all who turn to God.

And Jesus needs our faith to grow so that we can see that asking and questioning aren't forbidden by God but rather one of the ways in which we learn and grow closer to what God intends for us in our lives. For the example of the Canaanite woman is that a great faith comes when we approach God, we listen, we respond, and we allow our lives to be challenged and transformed.