

You Have Great Faith

Matthew 15:10-28

August 20, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted!” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

We are mostly going to concentrate on the miracle part of today’s reading. But a teaching of Jesus leads up to the miracle. Chapter fifteen begins with the Pharisees and teachers of the law asking Jesus why his disciples did not wash their hands before they ate. Jesus then went on to explain and to teach that those things that enter a person are not what make the person unclean. It is what comes out of a person—those things that come from the heart—that make a person unclean.

Cleanliness before God has nothing to do with outward appearance and action. Cleanliness before God is all about the heart. As the Lord said to Samuel before David was anointed king, “The Lord does not look at the things (you) look at. (You) look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” I wonder why it is so many folks have difficulty understanding this basic truth—understanding it in a practical sense.

Anyway, the faith of the Canaanite woman we read about illustrates this truth. A word, to begin, about some of the details of the story.

First, this woman was not a Jew. We know from Mark’s Gospel that she was a Greek. She was also a Canaanite woman. Matthew wrote his Gospel with Jewish readers in mind. So he made a point of saying this woman was a Canaanite. This meant that she was descended from a people who were ancient enemies of Israel. She was also a woman, if I may reiterate the obvious. There is that story in John’s Gospel where Jesus talked to a woman by a well. That woman was a

Samaritan. Samaritans were not well liked by Jews. The disciples were not surprised to find Jesus talking to a Samaritan. They were surprised that Jesus was talking to a woman. So this woman who was not a Jew and who was descended from Israel’s enemies approached the Messiah to ask for a blessing. Of all the nerve. Talk about your pure, unmitigated gall.

This conversation took place in the region of Tyre and Sidon. Jesus left Galilee and went to that region. Those cities were along the Mediterranean coast...about forty miles from Galilee. This was pagan territory.

So Jesus was in or near pagan land. A woman who was not a Jew and whose family tree consisted of Israel’s enemies met him. This was the setting.

Let me just insert this little tidbit of information. The twenty-second verse says that a Canaanite woman came to Jesus. In the Greek there is an extra word in that verse which the translators of the New International Version—from which I read—chose not to include. The Greek says, “Behold” a Canaanite woman came out to meet Jesus. Behold. Big deal, you say. Well...yeah. That specific word “behold” points to the extraordinary nature of the story to follow. The angel did not say to the shepherds, “Hey, I’ve got some good news for you!” The angel said, “Behold, I have some good news!” Extraordinary good news. Some versions of the NIV leave it out there, too. But Matthew wanted to let his readers know from the start that what he was about to write was of an extraordinary nature.

This woman came to Jesus and asked for mercy. She said her daughter was suffering from

demon-possession. Not just suffering a little...but suffering terribly. I have always said that there is one prayer we lift up to God that is always answered...and answered right away. That prayer is, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." I promise you that when you pray that prayer, it will be answered without delay. You've heard me say that.

This woman asked for mercy, and it seems Jesus delayed. The passage says, "Jesus did not answer a word." What gives? Well, it must be noted that the woman was not asking for mercy because she was a sinner. She was imploring for mercy because her daughter had this problem.

Jesus paused. The disciples took advantage of the pause. They asked Jesus to send her away. Why did they want to be rid of this woman? They did not want this woman sent away because she was a non-Jew and a woman from a pagan land. No. They wanted her dismissed because she was a bother to them. "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us. She is bothering us."

Boy, few things stopped Jesus quicker than his disciples whining about someone imposing upon them. Check it out. The feeding of the five thousand. The little children being brought to Jesus. When the disciples felt put upon or inconvenienced, Jesus made sure they knew an opportunity for ministry existed. The disciples were bothered. Poor babies. So Jesus decided to answer.

And a curious answer he gave. "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." Now what in the world did he mean by that? He most likely meant what he said. Remember that Matthew wrote his Gospel for Jews. Mark records this same incident. But he leaves out the specific statement about the lost sheep of Israel. He does include that part about it not being right to take the children's bread and giving it to the dogs...but not the lost-sheep-of-Israel thing. Mark wrote for Gentiles, and they would not have understood what Jesus was saying...and Mark did not want to take the time to explain. Jesus came as a light for all nations. The Bible cannot be any clearer than it is on that topic. Jesus died for all. That means everyone. Jesus

died to draw all people to him. But his ministry began by letting the Jews know he was the One promised by their prophets and poets. Even Paul—the missionary to Gentile lands and people—whenever he entered a city, first went to the synagogue in that city. He began there.

Anyway, this woman knelt before Jesus and asked for his help. That was when Jesus said it was not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. Let me state that in no way was Jesus implying that this woman was any kind of Gentile dog. That would be un-Jesus like, don't you think? Jesus was talking more about procedure. Children eat first. Then you might feed the household pet.

Note that the woman did not argue with Jesus. She seemed to take no offense. Her answer was masterful. Maybe she was not able to sit at the Master's table...non-Jew that she was. But perhaps she might be allowed to receive even a crumb of God's mercy.

And here we have a contrast to what we looked at last week. In the previous chapter, Jesus said to Peter, "You of little faith. Why did you doubt?" To this woman he said, "You have great faith! Your request is granted."

Okay...so at the beginning I mentioned that the sinner's prayer for mercy is always answered...and answered immediately. Jesus may have waited a bit in today's story...but the faith that seeks mercy is always honored. Faith that seeks mercy is always honored. For faith that seeks mercy is a most humble faith. The woman demonstrated this kind of faith. We could learn from her.

Allow me this confession. I just don't think I am such a humble guy all that often...if at all. Now I am maybe not so much like James and John. Remember what they did? They asked Jesus for places of honor in the kingdom. They wanted to be seated on the right and left hands of Jesus. They even had their mom go to Jesus and intercede for them. Talk about your arrogant kind of faith. I don't think I am that bad...which just might be quite arrogant on my part to even think that. But I'll be satisfied with a place in heaven.

Oh, but there are times when I think I deserve a little in terms of blessing. I am sure this is not true of everyone here. But maybe one or two can identify and empathize with me. I mean, I am a child of God. That ought to be worth something. I really try to live the life of faithful obedience to God. I am a part of the covenant and all that. A part of the new covenant. So I kinda think that perhaps God could throw a little extra blessing my way. I am one of the lost sheep to whom Jesus was sent. So I expect to be showered with blessings. Now we could discuss what constitutes a blessing...but that is a discussion for another time. I think you know what I mean here. At least, I hope so. "God, I am one of yours. Bless me." We are talking attitude here.

I remember years ago often singing this Gospel song. Maybe some of you remember. "There shall be showers of blessing: this is the promise of love; there shall be seasons refreshing, sent from the Savior above." Then came the chorus. "Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need: mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead!" Oh my. Mercy drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead.

Yep...we expect to be showered with blessings. Perhaps the mercy drops are what our faith should crave.

This woman teaches us a thing or two. A crumb of blessing? Yeah. That is pretty good, too. Her daughter was healed. A humble faith seeks mercy. Mercy is what a humble faith receives. That is good. Mercy is what we need.

Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.