

Twentieth Sunday of the Year

August 16th. THE CANAANITE WOMAN: Matthew 15:21-28

There was a character in the Gospel of today; **Matthew 15:21-28**, who Jesus once described with four immortal words: **Great is your faith**. She was a Canaanite woman who came from the country to the north of Palestine, a country hostile to the Jews. She was presumably married, she had at least one child; but that's all we know about her. We don't know whether she was a good woman or a bad woman. We don't know her name. All we know of her is that in this single encounter with Jesus, he spoke to her this four-word epitaph: **Great is your faith**.

Only four words but they are enough to make her immortal. We can trust these words as being true because the expert on faith spoke them. Jesus searched for faith, as a gem collector would find jewels. He did not always find it in his disciples. On no occasion that we know did he ever say of Peter, James, and John: Great is your faith. More often the words he spoke to them: You of little faith. On only one other occasion did Jesus praise a person for their faith. Interestingly, that was a Roman soldier stationed in Capernaum.

Great is your faith. Think of what it would mean if an aspiring young artist had Picasso place his hand on his shoulder and say: You have a great talent. How wonderful it would be then to a believer in God, if Jesus would place his hand on our shoulder and say: You have a remarkable talent for faith. But how does one qualify for this praise? What does one have to do? To answer these questions let us take a closer look at her story. What might have inspired Jesus in her to notice her great Faith?

First, we can say of this Canaanite woman that **she was willing to cross barriers**. Her faith consisted mainly in the fact that she turned to Jesus for help. That was quite remarkable, however, when you remember that she was a Gentile, a Canaanite, and therefore a traditional enemy of the Jews. They had been despised for centuries. It was as real and deep an enmity as exists today between the Arabs and the Jews.

On another note, one might wonder what indeed Jesus was doing in this foreign land. On no other occasion did he venture out of Palestine. Why now? The common explanation is that he knew that he was coming to the end of his earthly ministry and he needed privacy to further train his disciples to carry on after his death. He couldn't find this privacy in Palestine, so he went into Gentile territory where people didn't know him, or at least would pay no attention to him. It was quite unlikely that a Canaanite would approach much less consult a Jewish rabbi. The prejudices went too deep. This Canaanite woman was well aware of this great gulf between the Jews and her people. Yet, here was a woman who had a desperate need; her daughter was deathly ill. She was therefore willing to cross over and turn to Jesus for help. That was her faith.

Faith still consists of turning to Christ for help and barriers today still must be crossed. There is the barrier of time, 2000 years to be precise, which, barring the sudden invention of a time machine is a wide gulf. Jesus lived then and we live now. We think: It's such a different ball game today. How can he possibly help me? There is the barrier of culture. A generation that travels faster than the speed of sound may well wonder, how it can get help from a Palestine Jew who traveled on a donkey? Can Jesus even understand our problems? There is the barrier of pride. Am I willing to get beyond myself and admit that I cannot handle every situation that comes up in life? Are we able to cross the barrier that says: I don't need you Jesus. I am doing quite well by myself.

It seems clear that when this lady turned to Christ for help she knew little of him. She first addressed him by simply saying, Sir. Then, unsure if she had given the proper title, she added, Son of David. Undoubtedly she had heard of the great powers of Jesus and she was willing to put down her pride and cry out for help: "Have pity on me." But, that was her faith and the extent of her understanding of who Jesus was and it was enough. There was no great exercise of intellect involved. She didn't know any dogmas or creed. **Her faith simply**

existed in the fact that she came to Jesus for help in a situation where she had exhausted all of her own resources.

Secondly, we can say of her that **she refused to be put off.** There were at least three intimidating factors that could have made her give up. First there was the silence of Jesus. The scriptures tell us that to her cry of help and outstretched hand Jesus replied not a word: how unlike him. How uncharacteristic. There is no reaction harder to bear than silence. A flat “No” at east acknowledges your presence and tells you where you stand. But when there is silence you don't know what the person is thinking or even if they have acknowledged you. There is no sterner test of faith than the silence of God. It was that way to Job. He could have stood all of his endless suffering if only the Almighty had not seemingly gone into hiding and cut off all communication. Again and again he shook his fist at heaven and challenged God to come out. It's like talking to someone on a telephone and suddenly suspecting that the person is no longer there. They haven't hung up the receiver; they are just silent.

That's how this Canaanite woman must have felt. She told Jesus that her daughter was sick and needed help and what she got in reply was silence. Surprisingly, this did not intimidate her. She perceived what very few people have the faith to perceive that the silence of God does not mean the indifference of God. This woman did not lose heart in the face of silence.

Another intimidating factor was that this woman received no help from the disciples. Indeed, they regarded her pleas for help as merely a nuisance. They urged Jesus: “Send her away; see how she comes shouting after us.” They said the same thing when they saw 5000 hungry people we met one week ago, at the Sea of Galilee. They said the same thing when a poor crippled beggar cried out for help at the Pool of Bethesda. Even when the children tried to see Jesus, they tried to send them away. Too often this has been the church's response to human suffering. Send them away to prisons, to welfare agencies, to ghettos. The disciples, like the church today, had become fatigued under the constant pressure of the demands made upon them. **Part of this woman's faith, however, was that she would not be put off by the indifference of people.**

Yet, the disciples did not seem to be the only ones putting this woman off. When Jesus finally did break his silence he said to her, “I have been sent to the House of Israel and to them alone.”

Was Jesus testing her? We don't know. But it sounds very much as if he is saying, “sorry, you are not a religious woman.” But even then she refused to be put off. In spite of what Jesus said she fell at his feet and cried out: Sir, help me. That was the essence of her faith. She may not have belonged to the synagogue; she may not have known the Torah, but **she had a need and that was enough.** This brings us to the third point of her faith: She realized that she had no claim on Jesus for the request that she was making.

To this woman's plea for help Jesus makes another statement that we have difficulty in understanding. It does not sound like something that he would say. He said to her: It is not right to take children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” That sounds like a contemptuous insult. Even today the term dog is used for something particularly despicable. It has been pointed out that the actual word that Jesus used was not dog but puppy. He was referring to a household pet and not the kind of wild dogs that roamed the streets at that time. Some say that he was not insulting her but teasing her and that he probably had a smile on his face when he spoke these words. I don't think so. I think he is drawing the lines here. His ministry is not to the Gentiles. We certainly could understand it, then, if at this point the poor woman burst into tears and simply ran away.

But **she didn't cry and she didn't walk away.** She answered Jesus by saying: “It is true sir. I admit that I am a dog. I realize that I have no claim upon you.” That was her faith and that is still faith today. It is faith to go to God for help and at the same time admit that we have no claim upon him. Having nothing that we have done to merit his mercy, in no position to make demands, we go to God in faith, we go to Him with Humility.

The woman said to Jesus: Sir, even the dogs eat the scraps from the master's table. She was saying in effect: Sir, I admit that I have no claim upon you, but there must be some extra grace that you have that I would be deserving of. Jesus replied to her: Woman, what great faith you have. Be it as you wish. From that moment her daughter was restored to health. The greatness of this woman's faith consists in:

1. Her willingness to cross the barrier of racism.

2. Her refusal to be put off or ignored because of her position in life.

And 3. Her humility in admitting that she did not deserve the Master's attention and time.

I want to reiterate what we can learn from this gentile woman; **She is an example to us of perseverance, courage and love. But she is also an example of faith.** Jesus said to her, 'Woman you have great faith. Let your wish be granted.' She is a model of what could be called tough faith. Sometimes you hear people say, 'Ah, it's easy for you; you've great faith.' But it's not like that at all. Faith doesn't always make things easy. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be the case. It's because we have faith that we refuse to give up. Faith impels us to persevere, to struggle on, often with no guarantee of a happy outcome.

Faith is not a magic wand. It calls forth from us humility, courage, perseverance, and above all love. **A mother never gives up. Neither does a person with faith.** Faith and love are inseparably connected. Love is the expression of our faith. Amen