

Great Is Your Faith

Matthew 15:21-28

There was a character in the Gospel who Jesus once described with four immortal words: Great is your faith. She was a Canaanite woman from the country to the north of Palestine, a country hostile to the Jews. Most assume she was married and had at least one child; but that's about all we know about her.

We don't know whether she was a good woman or a bad woman. We don't even 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 enough to make her immortal. On no occasion did Jesus ever say to Peter, James, or John: Great is your faith. More often he said: You of little faith. And on only one other occasion did Jesus praise someone for their faith - the Roman soldier stationed in Capernaum.

We regard the Canaanite woman with more than just an academic interest. She stirs in us feelings of admiration, perhaps even envy, because she stands where most of us want to be. In the presence of Christ, who says of us: Great is your faith.

Think of what it would mean to hear those words from Jesus. How do we qualify for praise such as this? What do we have to do?

First, we have to cross barriers, which this Canaanite woman was willing to do. Her faith consisted mainly in the fact that she turned to Jesus for help. Which doesn't seem all that great. But remember that she was a Gentile, a Canaanite, and a traditional enemy of the Jews. Her kind had been despised for centuries. It was as real and deep a hatred for each other then as exists today between the Arabs and the Jews.

And don't you wonder what Jesus was doing in that 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 that deep. Yet, here was a woman whose daughter's illness caused her to enter enemy territory, and turn to Jesus for help. That was her faith.

Faith consists of turning to Christ for help regardless of the barriers that must be crossed. It seems clear to me that when this lady turned to Christ for help she knew very little about 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 his great powers and was willing to put aside her pride and cry out: "Have pity on me."

There was no great exercise of intellect. She didn't know theology, nor did she have any dogma 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.

And we can see that **she refused to be put off**. There were a few intimidating factors that would have made many of us give up. There was the silence of Jesus. Scripture tells us that to

her cry of help and outstretched hand Jesus replied not a word. There's no reaction harder to bear than silence. There's 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 God 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.

There was also the fact that she 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 at the Sea of Galilee. They said the same thing when a poor crippled beggar cried out for help at the Pool of Bethesda. They said the same things when the children tried to see Jesus, they tried to send them away.

I wonder how often the church has responded in the same way to human suffering. "Send them away" - to prisons, to welfare agencies, to ghettos. I wonder if the church today, like the disciples of Jesus, have become fatigued under the constant pressure of the demands made upon it. Part of this woman's faith, however, was that she would not be put off by the indifference of people.

And when Jesus finally did break his silence, he said to her what many of us would hear as intimidating, "I've been sent to the House of Israel and to them alone." Sounds very much as if he's saying, "sorry, you are not my faith group."

But she refused to be intimidated. 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 been a member of the synagogue; she may not have known the Torah, but she had a need and that was enough.

After crossing cultural barriers and refusing to be intimidated, **she approached Jesus in humility**. And to this woman's plea for help Jesus makes another statement that we have difficulty in understanding. 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. 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 commentators say that he wasn't as much insulting her but teasing her, and that he probably had a smirk on his face when he said it. Perhaps. But I think he is more drawing a line here, stating that 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 stood tall in the presence of Jesus and said, in effect: "It's true, sir. I am a dog. And I have no claim upon you. But even dogs eat the scraps from the master's table."

That was faith then; that is faith today. To go to God for help and at the same time admit that we have no claim on him. To admit that nothing we've done merits his mercy. That we are in no position to make demands, we go to God in faith.

Jesus replied: "Woman, what great faith you have. Be it as you wish". And at that moment, from that moment, her daughter was healed.

Great is her faith. How about you?