

August 17, 2014 Great Faith

The woman in our gospel story is just like you and me today. Because she lived 2,000 years ago, it is easy to dismiss her...as a metaphor...as a first-century church argument about who's in and who's out...as a person unfamiliar with modern life today, and consequently, not relevant. If that's what you think, you are missing God's revelation for you today. This is Scripture for us. This is Gospel for us. Today, God has given her to you to teach you something about living.

The important apostle, Simon Peter, was the centerpiece of last week's story from the preceding chapter in Matthew.

You might remember that he was walking on the water and began to sink.

Jesus reached out to him, and said, "You of little faith..."

Today, as we journey with Jesus, we encounter a Canaanite woman.

She was not one of the disciples. She was not one of the followers of Jesus. She was not even Jewish.

We have traveled out of Jewish country in Galilee, north to the territory of Tyre and Sidon.

That's where we meet her.

After a conversation with Jesus, he tells her "Great is your faith."

Wow...Peter, one of the inner circle of disciples, gets a "You of **little** faith."

This Syrophenician woman, this Canaanite, gets a "**Great** is your faith!" Wow.

We want Jesus to say that about us.

We want to have great faith.

What does this woman teach us regarding great faith?

What is God telling us through this woman about how we should live our lives today?

Listen to this woman...listen to what's going on in her heart.

She sees something that the disciples don't see.

She sees that Jesus the Savior is for everyone.

She sees that God's mercy and love is intended for everyone.

Jew or Gentile, insider or outsider, clean or unclean, male or female, rich or poor...everyone is shown mercy by God.

The disciples want to send her away.

The great Peter thinks she is unworthy and undeserving of the Master's attention.

Jesus tells her he was sent to the people of Israel.
She reminds him that God's love is for everyone.
Great is your faith!

So often we look at things through our cultural lens.
We see things because of how we were trained to see, with blinders on learned in our culture.
Every time we encounter God, God acts to remove our limits and enlarge our vision to see the height, depth, and breadth of God's kingdom.
Every time we say these people are in and those people are out, God breaks down the barriers and announces that mercy and forgiveness are given to all people.
Even the crumbs of God's grace are more than enough.
Great is your faith.

When Peter was sinking under the waves, he was worried about himself.
Oh, you of little faith.
When the Canaanite woman asked Jesus for help, she was thinking about someone else.
She was pleading for her daughter.
Out of love for another, she stood before Jesus.
Great is your faith.

She's teaching you, my friends, that God wants you to care for other people.
God calls you out of yourself and sends you outward into the world with love.
This woman is modeling for you the fundamental Christian orientation of other-centeredness, and not self-centeredness.
Christ calls you to faithfulness.
So your decisions, your thoughts, your values, are to give priority to the needs of other people, and not be limited to your preferences, comforts, and tastes.
Follow the example of the Canaanite woman.
Live like her. Love like her. Care like her.

I see something else in this woman.
I see persistence.
Vs. 22: She begs Jesus for mercy.
She faced rejection by the disciples and by Jesus.
Vs. 25: She kneels before Jesus, and says, "Lord, help me."

Jesus told her that he was sent to feed the people of Israel.
 Vs. 27: She begs Jesus for the crumbs that fall from the Master's table.
 Three separate times in these short eight verses, she asks Jesus for help.
 Even in the face of NO, she persists.
 Even when she had no religious or political claim to Jesus, she persists.
 Even when she is an unknown, an outsider, she persists.
 And Jesus announces, "Great is your faith."

I hear God wanting us to be persistent in faith.
 Not persistence in doing the wrong things...persistence in doing the right things.
 Persistent in serving.
 Persistent in worshipping.
 Persistent in caring.
 Persistent in loving.
 Persistent in prayer.
 Persistent in managing the life God has given us.
 Persistent in rooting ourselves in the Scriptures.
 Persistent in loving God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength...and loving
 your neighbor as yourself.
 As you are persistent in matters of life, God announces, "Great is your faith."

I notice something else about this woman God has given us.
 She knows that she needs something...she is not self-sufficient.
 She is dependent on God's mercy. She is desperate for mercy.
 She is one of the dogs in the story, a pejorative term both then and now.
 She kneels before Jesus. She prostrates herself before Jesus.
 She cries out a kyrie: LORD, HAVE MERCY.
 And Jesus says, Great is your faith.

This week, we said goodbye to the comedian and actor Robin Williams.
 I loved him. He was one of my favorites of all time.
 He had the gift of making people laugh and cry.
 He was immensely successful and popular.
 And yet, we did not see the struggles he faced with addiction and disease.
 His pain was intense.
 We forget, we fail to see, how much people hurt.
 The weight of our humanity is at times too much to bear.

That includes you...and those around you.
You are all too familiar with pain...emptiness...suffering...addiction...heartache...
disease...death.
You are desperate for mercy.
You cry out for God's grace.
You pray for new spirit.
Like the Canaanite woman, you kneel before the Master.
Lord, have mercy.
This woman shows us who we really are before God.
We live dependent on God's grace.
When we recognize that, and live that out, Jesus says, "Great is your faith."

The Canaanite woman is you and me before God.
We see how God loves everyone.
We hear the call to be other-centered and care for our neighbor.
We strive to be persistent in our Christian living.
And we humbly kneel before the Master, begging for mercy.
Food for the journey, my brothers and sisters in Christ.