

Pentecost 12 / August 20, 2023

Matthew 15:28

“She said, ‘Yes Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ tables.’ Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith! Be it done to you as you desire.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.”

Great Faith

Do you think God has a sense of humour? It's not stated explicitly in the bible, although some people claim the platypus is evidence from creation that He does indeed have a sense of humour. Whatever your opinion, He certainly does have a strong sense of irony. Do you know how to define irony? Neither do I, but I sure know it when I see it. Our gospel reading is loaded with irony. Did you notice it? It's easy to overlook, because we tend to focus on the woman and the way Jesus responds to her at first. He doesn't seem kind and caring. First, He ignores her. Then He says rather curtly, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” When He finally does speak to her directly, He pretty much insults her saying, “It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs.” It sounds kind of cold and callous and by now we've forgotten all about humour and irony, haven't we?

It's not funny, it's deadly serious. The woman looks Him straight in the eye and replies, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' tables.” Wow, what an answer! Put yourself in her position, would you have been able to come up with such a magnificent reply? Be honest, most of us would have been left speechless and the rest of us would have mouthed off some choice words and walked off in a huff, vowing never to go to His church again.

Are you good at coming up with replies on the spur of the moment? Are snappy answers your forte? This woman is the queen of snappy answers. There was nothing the Jewish Rabbis honoured more than a quick rebuttal that wins the argument and turns it on its head. The greatest Rabbi, the Son of God, the heir to David's eternal kingdom applauds her saying, “Great is your faith.” Then He rewards her saying, “Be it done for you as you desire.”

It's deadly serious and its ironic. You've probably forgotten about irony again, haven't you? It's ironic, because the person who came up with the reply that turned the argument on its head and who expressed great faith was the last person anyone would have expected to have faith at all. Jesus was sent first and foremost to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. He was training His disciples to go to the nations, to people like the Canaanite woman. The lost sheep of the house of Israel were waiting for the Messiah, the heir to the throne of King David. They should have recognized Jesus as the Messiah, received Him as king and worshipped Him as Lord, but they didn't.

On the other hand, this woman who lived amongst the pagans in the region of Tyre and Sidon sees Him as her Saviour, addresses Him as Lord, falls down at His feet begging for mercy and won't leave until she receives it. In contrast to the faithlessness of the children of Israel, she has faith. In contrast to the small faith of the disciples, she has great faith! Like I said with irony, I may not know how to define faith, but I sure know it when I see it! Great faith recognizes Jesus as the Son of David, comes to Him for mercy and worships Him as Lord.

Jesus didn't find much faith among the children of Israel. In a sense this incident is a climax of faith in Matthew's gospel. The great faith of the Canaanite woman, stands in stark contrast to the small faith of the disciples and the lack of faith among the children of Israel. Prior to Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus has been rejected by the residents of Nazareth, the village in which He grew from childhood to adulthood. John the Baptist, whom Jesus called the greatest prophet, has been executed by King Herod, who fancied himself a devout Jew. Crowds have followed Him, but only because He healed their sick and gave them bread and fish to eat. Most people don't understand Him and those that do, don't like what he says.

His disciples are slow to understand. He has to explain things to them afterwards. They begin to see below the surface and start to grasp who He is, but a full chapter before Peter confesses Him as the Christ, this Canaanite woman confesses Him as Lord and Son of David. That's irony and that's important, because it shows the mysterious ways of the Spirit and the power of God's word to create faith, even in the most unlikely of places.

The Canaanites were infamous from Old Testament times for their hostility to the Lord and His servants and for their worship of pagan gods, in particular the fertility god Baal. Fertility gods were supposed to promote growth and make animals give birth. They promised rich rewards, not in the distant future, but in the here and now. Their worship involved illicit physical gratification on the part of devotees. The worship of fertility gods

was a constant temptation to Israel and a sin that they often committed. In the days of the prophet Elijah, the Phoenician born queen Jezebel and her husband Ahab king of Israel, almost succeeded in eradicating the worship of the Lord and replacing it with the worship of Baal.

The Lord had told Israel to eradicate the Canaanites from the land, lest they lead them away from the Lord. And that's exactly what happened in the days of Elijah in particular and throughout the Old Testament period in general. The Canaanites embodied the violation of the first commandment of having no other gods before the Lord and served as a constant temptation for Israel.

When you read a book like Deuteronomy, you get the sense the Lord hated the Canaanites and wanted them exterminated. In fact, that's what He told Israel to do. That's probably what the disciples remembered, when they asked Jesus to make this woman go away. But it wasn't the Canaanites the Lord hated, it was their idolatry and worship practices that included the sacrifice of humans. The Lord knew the Canaanites would try to prevent Israel from fulfilling its purpose of being a light to the nations by making Him known in the world. But on the other hand, the Canaanites were among the nations Israel was to enlighten as to the knowledge of the Lord. The best way to destroy an enemy is to make her or him your friend.

God's love reached out also to the Canaanites and it was not without effect. Remember God's word never returns to Him empty. Centuries later one of their descendants knelt before Jesus, addressed Him as the Son of David, begged Him for mercy and called Him Lord. The Lord is a God of wonders and a God of love. More than just the Canaanites, this woman represents all of us Gentiles. Even though we are not of the house of Israel, God's love in Christ has reached out to us and with her, the Holy Spirit has also blessed us with faith to believe!

Yet, her faith took a terrible beating didn't it? She called Him Lord, confessed Him as the Son of David and He dismissed her as unworthy of His attention, let alone of His concern. But she didn't wither and that's what made her faith great. Although she was kneeling, she stood her ground. And that's what made it possible for her great faith to be displayed, as an example to the disciples and to all believers to this very day. Jesus often spoke of faith to the disciples, but hearing and seeing are two different things. Like irony, I may have a hard time defining faith, but I sure know it what it looks like when I see it!

This woman showed the disciples what a great faith looks like. This woman shows us what faith looks like, whether its great or small. Faith looks to Jesus for mercy, even when He seems to look away. Faith pleads for mercy, even when Jesus seems to scowl. Faith knows that despite contrary appearances that God is full of mercy and that Jesus is the fullest expression of His mercy in forgiveness and peace. Faith cries for mercy on the basis of God's love in Jesus Christ!

This is what makes her faith great! She presumes on nothing in herself or about herself, she makes her plea on the basis of Jesus' mercy. Her faith isn't great because she is the queen of snappy comebacks, or because she was able to give a clever answer to a hard question. Her faith was great, because she makes her plea on the basis of Jesus' mercy.

Several chapters earlier the leaders of a synagogue come to Jesus and request that He heal a Centurion's servant. In contrast to this woman, who throws herself at Jesus' feet and appeals to His mercy, they ask Jesus to do this because the man deserves it. They say, "He loves our nation and built our synagogue." As Paul said in our lesson from Romans, Israel's mistake was to pursue God on the basis of their works, rather by receiving His grace through faith.

Jesus healed the centurion's servant just as He healed the Canaanite woman's daughter, not because he deserved it, (as the Centurion himself admitted) but because He is full of grace and mercy. Faith comes to Jesus on the basis of His mercy. Faith believes that no matter what our eyes see or our ears hear that He is kind and caring. No matter what the circumstance of our lives, faith believes in God's mercy in Christ Jesus and that's what makes it great!

Do you have a great faith? Could you go toe to toe with the Canaanite woman? Do you know what's great about faith? It doesn't have to be great to be great! It's kind of ironic isn't it? In fact, Jesus said, "If you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move..." If she had put her mind to it, that Canaanite woman could have moved mountain ranges, but that's beside the point. The point is that faith is effective because it looks to Jesus. Even if its small, faith is great when it looks to Jesus for mercy. Jesus makes faith great! Jesus gives faith! Look to Him! Believe Him! In Jesus' Name Amen