**Matthew 15:21-28** September 3, 2017

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*Matthew 15:21 Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. 22A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.” 23Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” 24He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” 25The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. 26 He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” 27“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” 28Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**What Makes Faith Great?**

Some parts of the Bible are much easier to understand from a distance. Some of God’s Word is probably easier for us to understand than it was for the people in the Bible events two thousand years ago. But sometimes I come across Bible passages that I feel like I can understand only if I step back into the events. Here in Matthew 15, in one of my Bibles, I have written in the margin, “Preach this event from the perspective of the disciples.” Don’t know when I wrote it. But it seems like it is one of those times when we need to put on the Virtual Reality headset.

Virtual Reality Headsets were all the rage back about the New Year’s or so. I haven’t heard as much lately. Not sure why, but I am sure that we will hear more from that technology. You put one of these headsets over your eyes and when you look around, you see that you are, let’s say, standing on the Rocky Mountains. You look up and you see the bright sun; to the right is a snow field; to the left a sheer cliff—and your mind gets fooled into thinking it is real! All the while, however, you are in your living room.

So today, with Jesus and this Canaanite woman, we don’t watch them from a distance of 2000 years and 6000 miles. We are going there.

So here I am, one of the Twelve. I spent nearly three years as a student of the traveling teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Those years were the best years of my life. They would have been the best years of anyone’s life. Jesus amazed us every single day. I’m not just talking about the miracles – the walking on water, the feeding 5,000 and all that. But everything he did amazed us. The things he taught, the life he lived. What was really amazing was to see how he treated people and talked with them. He treated every single person like had known them all their lives and talked to them like he knew what they were thinking—which he did.

One day I often think about is that day up in the wooded hills of Galilee when the Canaanite woman came to him. What I keep coming back to are those words he spoke, ***“Woman, you have great faith.”*** Jesus never said that about us twelve. You know what Jesus said about us? He usually said, *“O you of little faith!”* Like that time in the storm. No, Jesus never told any of us, “You have great faith.”

Now you might think I am a little bit sore about Jesus telling this stranger woman that she had great faith, but never saying that to us who were with him all the time. But you know what? It doesn’t bother me. It doesn’t bother me because Jesus always spoke truth. So if he said she had great faith, she did. And if he never said I did, then just maybe I didn’t. Which doesn’t change the fact that I know he had a special place for me in his heart. So I have thought about this Canaanite woman a lot over the years, and I have mulled over this event trying to figure out what made her faith great.

Well, there we were in the scattered settlements nestled in the mountains and forests of northern Galilee. Jesus had taken us away from the lake, away from the crowds. It was quite nice. We had a break from the commotion, but it didn’t last long. Which again, you might think I was upset about, but we understood. Jesus had a sort of magnetism, and he had power, and he loved people. So when we saw the crowds starting to come again, we were a little disappointed, but we understood. If I had had a diseased parent or a demon possessed child, I would have brought them to Jesus. You can’t condemn people for doing what you would do.

So one day, this woman shows up at the place we were staying. Just by looking at her, we knew she was not a Jew. The way she dressed, the way she carried herself, the facial features—we knew that she was a Canaanite. That made us uneasy. Canaanites have been our adversaries for centuries.

Jesus seemed to give credence to our not-so-vague suspicions about Canaanites by doing what we saw him never do to anyone else. Everyone else who ever came to Jesus, whether friend or enemy, Jesus always had time for them—even his enemies. But this woman? He didn’t say a word. She shouted and cried. A woman’s tears kind of get to me. But not Jesus on this day, even though she pleaded for a little girl possessed by a demon. But even though she knew that no Jewish religious teacher would give her the time of day, she still kept on pleading with him, ***“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!”*** It touched our hearts.

So finally we came to Jesus and said, ***“Send her away.”*** It wasn’t that we wanted him to chase her off, but we wanted him to say *something* to her, to help or to send her away—something.. We just couldn’t take the crying and the pleading. And then he told us, not her, but us, ***“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”***

And why should Jesus have not been sent to Israel? God told Abraham that his children would be specially blessed, and we Jews are those children. We had also been given the Law of Moses, the Temple, and the promise of a Savior through our race. So it made sense that the Messiah would be for the Jews. Sure, there were a few others like Rahab from Jericho and Ruth from Moab. But they were the exception. Salvation was for Abraham’s children. We only later understood that Jesus was talking about his preaching and teaching ministry. His mission, however, was not for the Jews only. As another of our number wrote later, *“He is the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world”*—but we didn’t really understand that at the time.

So while Jesus was telling us about being sent to the lost sheep of Israel, this Canaanite woman saw her chance. Just by saying those words, even though they sounded like words of rejection, Jesus had acknowledged her existence. So she took the chance and ran with it. She rushed up to Jesus bowing down on her knees before him, humble, pleading for her child. (She was a credit to mothers everywhere.) And once she got to that point it’s like she already knew that he was going to help her.

But Jesus didn’t make it easy. He said to her, ***“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”*** We all knew what he meant. But some people get upset about that, like Jesus was insulting her, and maybe it was a little poke, but it wasn’t an insult. Your English translation isn’t a wrong translation, just a little incomplete. Because, you see, the word Jesus used for “dogs” was *not* the word we use for stray dogs scavenging the trash heaps. The “dogs” Jesus talked about were something you Americans understand. That word was for the lapdogs that some Greek families keep in the home. We Jews would never do that, but people like this Canaanite woman would. “Pets” you call them. And I have heard how you take care of these little dogs. I have heard tell that here in America there are houses where people have trouble putting food on the table, but they have fat dogs. That must have sort of been what Jesus had in mind when he told her, ***“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.”***

While Jesus was saying that the children’s food shouldn’t be given to the pets, he was admitting that they had a place in the house.

Which is where Jesus made his mistake. Well, he didn’t make mistakes. But it looked like it to us at the time. As soon as she heard him say it, she had a comeback: *“Quite so, Lord, for the dogs eat from the crumbs which fall from the table.”* (Author’s translation). She is not going to argue if God wants to be extra merciful to Jews, if he is going to call them children and her something else. That is his business. But when Jesus called her one of the little pups in the house, Jesus admitted that she does have a place in the house, and that by bringing her into the house, even as a “dog”, God would be obligated to care for her too. She would be content with that.

The way she went round and round with Jesus reminded me of that time our forefather Jacob wrestled with the angel. Remember that back in Genesis? The good book says, *“Jacob was left alone [that night], and a man wrestled with him till daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip so that his hip was wrenched… Then the man said, ‘Let me go, for it is daybreak.’ But Jacob replied, ‘I will not let you go unless you bless me.’”* Which I never fully understood and maybe still don’t but it was like that with this woman. It was like Jesus had planned all along to bless her, but for his own reasons, he couldn’t bless her until she had wrestled in prayer. And Jesus let himself be beaten in this prayer wrestling match, like that angel of the Lord with Jacob.

Then Jesus said it, ***“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”***

So what made her faith great? I think it was partly who she was – that she was an outsider. Sometimes, you can’t do great things unless you have great obstacles, and I think that God put that obstacle there to make her faith great. And maybe I always had it too easy to have a great faith. She had very good reasons to *not* expect Jesus to help her. And yet it didn’t matter. By the faith God put in her heart, she knew that Jesus would be merciful to her. She was like all those tax collectors, women of the night, all kinds, who came to Jesus crying out, ***“Have mercy.”*** And he always did.

You know who asks for mercy? People who deny their crimes don’t ask for mercy. They say, “You are so unfair! You have no right!” They laugh at authority. But when you say, ***“Have mercy,”*** you admit that God has a right to punish you. Yet faith says, “I trust God to be merciful.” We don’t like being in the position where our future depends on someone’s mercy, but great faith trusts God’s mercy for Jesus’ sake.

Even though Jesus never said what made her faith great, in my estimation the second thing that made her faith great was her persistence. It was amazing. When Jesus didn’t say a word, she didn’t quit. And when Jesus threw one obstacle after another in her path, she kept pursuing him. Like Abraham asking for Sodom to be spared for 50 or 30 or just 10 righteous people. Like Jesus himself, in a few months in the Garden of Gethsemane, would plead three different times for the cup of God’s wrath to be taken from him. In the same way, this woman had faith, and she would not stop trusting God to be merciful to her. Which is something we could all do more often – to humbly pray again and again, even when God seems to say “No” or seems to not ever be listening.

And that is why I guess Jesus never said I have great faith. Because I don’t know that I have had that same kind of persistence, or that complete humility, or that complete trust she had.

But here are two more things that I do know.

First, Jesus deals with each of us on our own strengths and weaknesses. God’s word promises, *“God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out.”* So even if I don’t have *great* faith, I know that God knows that, and he like a Shepherd tends me according to my strengths and weaknesses.

Second, every imperfection in my faith, Jesus Christ has covered with his own perfection. He has taken the condemnation of my weak faith and nailed it to the cross. That isn’t an excuse for my sin. But it is a daily assurance when I am faced with my sin, he forgives. And he promises that one day he will take me to be with him in heaven where all my failings will pass away. And then we won’t need faith anymore because you and I will see him as he is: our real and visible Lord. Amen.