

13th Sunday after Pentecost – Year A – September 11, 2011 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on Matthew 15:21-28 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Jesus Strengthens Faith”

There is a question that has been asked in nearly every generation... “Do you remember where you were when...” “Where were you on December 7, 1941? Where were you on November 22, 1963? Where were you on April 19, 1995 when you first heard the news of the Oklahoma City bombing?” Most of us were alive to remember where we were 10 years ago today, and how unreal the TV news footage seemed to us, like something from a Hollywood movie screen or a Tom Clancy novel.

How did Americans deal with the terror that struck their own soil? Following 9-11 churches across the nation reported an increase in Sunday morning attendance. Those same churches also reported that just a month later, that the influx of people had left and things were back to normal. How do we deal with terror?

If you have children, you can certainly identify with the tragedy that must have tugged at the heart strings of this mother in our story. Her daughter was suffering terribly from demon possession and there was absolutely nothing that she could do about it. The gospel writer Matthew tells us that this woman lived in the region of Tyre and Sidon, along the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. This region was about 30 miles northwest of Capernaum (which was by the Sea of Galilee) where Jesus spent the majority of his ministry. This region of Tyre and Sidon was a land of Gentiles, non-Jewish people, a land steeped in idolatry and paganism, influenced by godless Greek culture.

But this woman had heard about Jesus. The gospel writers tell us that reports of Jesus were broadcast far beyond the boundaries of Israelite territory. It was there, in the region of Tyre and Sidon, that Jesus traveled from Capernaum. He sought a quiet place, not to vacation, but to teach his disciples. But the news quickly spread, “Jesus is here!” This woman knew who Jesus was. She knew what he could do for her. So she seeks him out. She knows more about him than that he is a miracle worker. Notice how she addresses him, **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!”** This is a cry of faith. The woman knew that he was the Hope and Consolation of Israel, the one descended from King David, the Messiah promised to Israel. Through those reports that had been carried to her hometown, the Holy Spirit had worked faith in her heart. In faith she looked to Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, who would and could help her in her misery.

But he doesn't, not at first. He doesn't even acknowledge her. His disciples are the ones who plead with him, “Don't you see how she is bothering us with her pleading. Heal her daughter and let her go, so we can have some peace and quiet.” And how does he respond to his disciples' plea? **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”** Is this the gracious and friendly Lord? Is this the Comfort of Israel? It sure doesn't appear that way. According to the prophecies and his Father's will, Jesus was chosen to offer salvation and forgiveness of sins to his people, the Israelites.

In spite of his answer, she persists in her cry for help, and kneels before him. Literally, in the original language of the New Testament it says that she fell down on her face, prostrate on the ground at his feet. Before she was calling out after him, now, she gets his attention, forces him to look her in the face. Her child is sick, and this doctor has the skills to heal, but he refuses. Wouldn't you be as persistent if it were your child? In faith she cries out again, **“Lord, help me!”**

Now Jesus is forced to speak to her. Does he offer her relief from her misery? Does he show compassion on her daughter whose body and soul is being tortured by Satan? No! He says, **“It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.”** He calls her a little house dog! In essence he is saying that it would not be proper for him to withdraw his service to his people, the Israelites, who were still in need of help and to instead spend that time and energy on the unclean heathen.

But notice that in his answer he does not say, “No.” He leaves the door open to her. The evangelist Mark records Jesus saying, **“First, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”** (Mark 7:24-30) Let the children be satisfied first. When they have had their fill, then, perhaps, there will be something also for the pet dog. The gospel is first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.

Notice her reply. She does not protest. She agrees with him! **“But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”** “Yes! You’re absolutely right! Don’t take the bread away from the children. Continue to feed your people Israel. I know that I am the little household dog. I am not part of the family of Israel. But I will gladly lick up the crumbs, for it will be of no harm to them that I eat what falls from the table.”

Martin Luther, commenting on this portion of Scripture wrote, “She catches the Lord Christ with his own words. Yes, still more, with the rights of a dog she gains the rights of a child. Yes, now where will he go, the dear Lord Jesus? He has caught himself and must help her. But know this well, he loves to be caught in this way.”

Jesus answers, **“Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.”** The gospel writers record that by the time the woman walked through the door of her home, her daughter had been set free from her suffering.

Why was this woman’s faith so great? It was great because of where she put her faith – in the Son of David. She looks to the grace of the Lord Jesus and to his Word of promise. Through faith she takes God’s hand and leads him to his own Words, points to them and says, “Look here! This is what you have promised! Answer me, according to your great mercy!” And she believes that he will! It was her persistence in prayer, persistence in clinging to the promises of God that showed evidence of her great faith.

But why is Jesus so distant and unloving? Ah! He only appears that way. Jesus is the Teacher. He knows how to skillfully lead his students from one step to the next, laying the foundation from one step to the next, until they reach the end that he had in mind throughout the lesson. But why did he appear so cold? To test her faith; to drive her faith deep into his promise so that her faith would become firm and strong; to force her to cling firmly to God’s promises, even though God appeared different than what his Word says of him. The Lord is gracious and merciful to his own and only desires their best, even at times when he conceals himself from them.

When disaster strikes our nation - through earthquake, flooding, hurricane, terrorism, and acts of violence; when our nation faces high unemployment, a plunging stock market and sagging economy; when loved ones die or become ill; when I still feel the guilt of my sins – and I pray about these things... and it seems that he doesn’t answer my prayers, doesn’t God appear to be unloving and cold?

And how do we often react when Jesus seems to be ignoring me? Then we cease praying. We put our study of his word on pause like the droves who filled churches post 9-11 and then returned about their business. We find ourselves in deep despair and depression. We lose hope. We begin to pout because we feel that God neither hears us nor cares about us. But could it be that the Master Teacher might have a plan in mind? Might he be leading us to an end that he knows is best for us? Does he not promise, **“I know the plans I have for you, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”?** (Jeremiah 29:11)

When we hear again the good and gracious promises from our loving Father who knows and who hears and cares... then we, like the woman, will fall on our faces before the feet of Jesus and cry out, “Lord, help me! I know that I am a sinner and am not worthy of your grace! I have proved that again and again by my failure to trust in your promises. But you have promised forgiveness to me and so I cling to your cross for pardon. Have mercy on me, Son of David!”

Jesus says to you and me, “Man, woman, child, you have great faith! Your request is granted!” And he feeds us with the crumbs that fall from the table. This is the bread of life (John 6:48) that falls from the master’s table, **“Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. For I am the LORD, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.”** (Isaiah 43:1) Oh, what sweet tasting crumbs that fall from Jesus’ hands! He has promised you that

he has redeemed you. For your sins of doubt, lack of faith, failure to trust God – God demands that we pay him for those sins. To put that into perspective, the current US debt is \$14 trillion. To pay it off, each of us here this morning would have to pay \$1.75 billion every year for the next 100 years! Impossible! And that doesn't even begin to touch what we owe our God! But Jesus stepped in on our behalf and paid the ransom price. Not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death. A high price to pay for you and me! But he did it! God the Father accepted Jesus' redemptive payment. He canceled your debt. You owe him nothing, for Christ paid it in full. God has forgiven you of your sins. You have been set free from your guilt.

Because Jesus has redeemed you and called you to faith and made you his own possession, he takes a very keen interest in you. He knows your hardships. He hears your cries for mercy. And so, when disaster strikes, we will pray to him in earnest. When he doesn't answer immediately, then we will be like the woman from our story and be even bolder in our prayers, be even more persistent in our prayers. When it appears that he isn't listening – even though he is - we will be like the woman and drive our faith deep into his promises – for he will not break his promises – and we will lead our God by the hand and point him to those promises that he made and say, “My dear Father in heaven, you have promised me that you will work all things for the good of those who love you – do that for me. (Romans 8:28) You have promised that you will be our Rock and Refuge and our strength – give me that strength, because I cannot stand on my own. (Psalm 18) You have promised me through your Son Jesus, that all who are weary and burdened may come to him and find rest – do that for me. (Matthew 11:28)”

When we do that, when we take God back to his promises, he is strengthening our faith. Because then we are forced to run back to his promises – to his Word and his Sacraments – and it is there alone that he strengthens us.

If attacks like 9-11 come again, when God sends hurricanes, tornadoes, flooding, earthquakes and financial distress on our nation, when death, illness, hardships come to us personally, we will fall down before him in humility and repentance, and we will be bold in our prayers. We will be persistent. We will appeal to his great promises, even when he appears to be a different God than what the Bible tells us – because we know what kind of God we have, a merciful God who loves us. And while we wait for his mercy, we will patiently sit under the table and lick up the scraps that fall from our Master's hands – by being immersed in his Word - so that our faith is rooted deeply in his Word. Come, Son of David! Have mercy on us! Strengthen our faith through your promises! Amen!