

Matthew 15:21-28

Lent 2, February 25, 2024
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And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon." ²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, "Send her away, for she is crying out after us." ²⁴ He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶ And he answered, "It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷ She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire." And her daughter was healed instantly.

Over the years, I have found that my personal faith has gotten weaker. Which is maybe not what you want to hear your pastor saying, but it's true. Over the years, my personal faith has grown weaker. When I was young, I heard that God loved me, that God cared for me, that God answers my prayers. And I did not doubt it! And as I've grown older, I've witnessed and experienced so many things that cause me not to *disbelieve* these things, but to believe them with less vigor. When I was in seminary, I was assured that the Lord would always bless His Word, that the Lord's Word would always have effect, and that the Lord is the Good Shepherd of His flock, the church, and He cares for His flock very much. And I did not doubt it! And as I've progressed in my ministry, I've seen and heard a lot of things, and I've experienced a lot of painful disappointments in working with individuals. And it's not that I no longer believe these promises of God, but I *do* constantly find myself ignoring them. My faith has grown weaker. When I was a child, I believed what I was told, and as I've grown older, I've often believed what I've seen and what I've experienced and what I've felt, *rather* than what I'm told.

And so, it is with great shame that I read the words Jesus spoke to the woman in our text, ***"O woman, great is your faith!"*** It is with great shame that I read these words, because I find myself wondering if Jesus would use that descriptor of me, ***"Great is your faith!"*** Which leads me to ask: how is it that this woman's faith is so great, when my faith seems to be so weak? We'll get the answer to that today as we consider the theme:

"Great Is Your Faith!"

- I. Great faith believes who Jesus really is
- II. Great faith knows Jesus has something to give

This reading is a lot like life. And here's what I mean. You can ask a lot of questions of this reading—a lot of questions about what's actually going on—and you will not get answers. Why is Jesus silent when this woman approaches in her need? You can guess, but you won't know. What's the disciples' tone of voice when they apparently want Jesus to just give her what she wants so that she'll go away? What's the emotional state of the woman as she continues to approach Jesus? Does Jesus *intend* to insult her? Does she *feel* insulted? We can guess, but we're given no answers.

This is a lot like the life of a Christian. There are a lot of questions, far more questions than answers, it would seem. "Why doesn't Jesus answer my prayer with something other than silence?" "Why do I struggle so much?" "Why can't I just be a different person?" "When will the wars, great and small, be over?" You know how it goes. That's how life can be, filled with questions. Where are the answers?

In this text too, there are lots of questions for which there no answers provided. It does however answer one question, and here it is: What does great faith believe about Jesus? You may have noticed from your readings in the Gospels that Jesus is often not all that impressed with the people around Him, not often impressed with the faith of even the disciples. But to *this* woman, He actually says, **“O woman, great is your faith!”** So this reading can teach us what “great faith” believes, and the first is this: **“Great faith” knows and believes who Jesus really is.**

Here we have a person approaching Jesus. She’s a gentile, she’s a woman, she’s a Canaanite. In those days, that’s three strikes against her, and as we know, “Three strikes and you’re out.” But she actually comes, and she addresses Jesus the way a disciple would. She calls Him “Lord.” In the Gospel of Matthew, only disciples address Jesus as Lord. Not only does she call Him “Lord,” she, a Canaanite woman, speaks to Jesus as an Israelite would. She calls Him “Son of David.” That’s the term that the Jews of Jesus’ day used to refer to the Messiah, thinking of the promise given to King David of the descendant after him whose throne and kingdom would have no end. She calls Him this: “Son of David.” Is she parroting things that she’s heard other people say? Does she *know* what she’s saying?

She does! She *knows*. And it’s *clear* that she knows because of her response to Jesus. Jesus tells her that **“it is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** In other words, it’s not right to give Israel’s gifts to the Gentiles. Because, after all, Jesus is the Son of David, and that means He’s come from a specific God, Jehovah, to fulfill specific promises related to a specific plan.

And, by the way, we say the same things about Jesus, calling Him Lord, praising Him as Messiah. But do *we* really know what we’re saying? Jesus being Messiah means, again, that He came to fulfill specific promises, namely to redeem us from all of our sins, to vanquish Satan, and to conquer death for us. But wouldn’t we sometimes rather Jesus fulfilled any promise *we* can think of instead? Wouldn’t we like to dictate the promises? We call Him Lord, which means that *He* is Lord and we are not. But don’t we sometimes like to think that *we* are Lord? That *we* know what would be best? That *we* have the best plans and that Jesus should be a servant that does what *we* say? We’ve been in this woman’s shoes! We’ve had problems that we want Jesus to take care of, we’ve gone to Jesus in prayer, but in so doing, *some* of those times we’ve ignored the fact that He is the Messiah and that He is the Lord, because *sometimes* we think He should do whatever *we* want Him to do.

“Lord.” “Son of David.” That’s what she calls Jesus. Does she know what she’s saying? Yes, she does. And one little word proves it. It’s a little odd, but it’s a word that *most* English translations miss. It’s the Greek word “gar.” That’s a little explanatory conjunction in Greek that means “for.” Or it can mean “because.” Jesus says, **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”** And the woman replies, **“Yes, Lord,—(and here’s where that word is in the Greek)—Yes, Lord, because even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”**

She’s not arguing with Jesus. There’s no “but” here. She’s not saying, “Yes, Lord, BUT...” She’s not trying to get Jesus to come around to *her* point of view. She is actually *agreeing* with Jesus. And then she says why she agrees. She knows that He is Israel’s Messiah, and she believes Him to be the Lord. She knows that God is keeping His promise to Israel, and that Jesus’ authority is all that matters. And she says, **“Yes, Lord, because...”** Meaning, “Yes, Lord, it is *not* right to take the children’s bread and

throw it to the dogs. Because even the dogs can still eat from the crumbs that fall off the table. And that's all I need! So full and gracious is the table of the Messiah King, that the crumbs are all that I need. And I know that there is something here for me."

And this is the second thing that great faith believes. First, **"Great faith" believes who Jesus really is.** And second, **"Great faith" knows Jesus has something to give.** And because this is true, He says, **"O woman, great is your faith. Be it done for you as you desire."** And because Jesus had something to give, **"Her daughter was healed instantly."**

I once worked with a guy who was my age who declared himself to be agnostic. That means that he wouldn't say that there is *no* God, he just wasn't sure. He was undecided. And I took it on as my goal to bring this man to believe that Jesus is God. So, we talked for many days and over many work shifts. And I explained to him sin and the origin of sin. I laid out for him God's plan of salvation, the many promises given to all people through the ages, and how those promises found their fulfillment in Jesus the Christ. I unfolded for him the Passion of our Savior and His death on the cross and what that means for sinners like us.

And one day, I came in to work, and I found him, and I struck up the conversation again. And I'll never forget this great disappointment. He told me that he had decided to become Buddhist. I was *dismayed*, to say the least. But I asked him why he wanted to be Buddhist. And he said he liked the idea of reincarnation, that after we die we come back as someone else. And so, I asked him what it was that prompted him to believe this? What could he point to as his reason for believing in reincarnation? And he had no answer, nothing to point to. All he said was that he liked the idea. He said it felt good to him to think of life in terms of reincarnation. There was nothing *external* that he could point to, his reasoning was entirely *internal*. It felt good.

This is the way that most of the world thinks about faith. Faith, for many, is nothing more than a good feeling inside that things will work out in your favor. And we can slip into that way of thinking sometimes. We might sometimes think that as long as we *feel* good inside, then that must mean that God loves us and that God is taking care of us. But if that's all we've got, what happens when we find ourselves in the shoes of this woman? She's got a problem; her daughter is severely oppressed by a demon. She is not feeling good! What would happen to our faith, if all it was based upon was good feelings about God—and then things start to feel *not so good*. What happens when we get sick, when others get sick, when loved ones die? What happens when our life suddenly *feels* like God is just pushing us away? What do we have then?

And that is why this Canaanite woman is such a model of "great faith" for us. She was pushed away, pushed away, pushed away, and yet she still held on to what had been revealed to her. She held on to what she had heard, that this was the Son of David, and He was the Lord. When everything *internally* must have felt so devastating, as she's pushed away and her needs ignored—she held on to something external. Specifically, what she had heard about the Messiah, the grace which He had, which extended, according to the Scriptures, even to Gentiles like herself.

We need that external promise too, something to hold onto and cling to when it feels like we are being pushed away. And thanks be to God, we've been given it! God has revealed to us so many such

promises. And I'm sure many come to mind that *you* cling to. Promises such as, ***“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”*** (Romans 8:28) His good purpose for us is eternal life together with Him, and so even the painful things, when the things that cause us to ask so many questions come—we actually have the answer. God *promises* to use this too for the purpose of our salvation. Or promises such as, ***“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.”*** (Psalm 23:4) Yes, this life is the valley of the shadow of death, and at times that shadow looms ever larger over our path, yet that *does not mean* that God has forsaken us. Here is the external truth that our faith can latch onto: that even when it *feels* like God may be pushing us away, He has *never* pushed us away. He might take away, He might prune us back from time to time, but it is *always* to bring us *closer* to Him.

The Apostle John writes in the intro to his Gospel: ***“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . [and] from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*** (John 1:14, 16) In His great grace, Jesus has something to give to you. Grace after grace after grace. Forgiveness for our sins, abolishment of any guilt, removal of shame, everlasting life. Grace after grace after grace.

Brothers and sisters-in-Christ, here are truths that we too may believe. Jesus *is* the Son of David. He *is* the promised King, hailed and then rejected as He knew He would be. He was crucified on a Friday, and the world was dark. But overcoming every plot and dark dream of every enemy, God raised Him from the dead. And He lives. He is exalted to the right hand of the Father. And He is the Lord. And He has something for you.

Now, that doesn't make great faith easy. In my own small world of experience, I would say that it sometimes makes things considerably harder, because if Jesus is Lord, then I am not. If Jesus is Lord and has something for me, He may have something for me that I may not have wanted. Nevertheless, the Son of David has risen. He is the Lord, and He is for you. You have a place with Him, yes. You belong with Him as His people, yes. He forgives you, yes. He gives you peace, there is a purpose to your living, and one day there will be full healing and eternal life, for both body and soul. In the meantime, keep praying. Keep going to Jesus as that woman did and be persistent. And cling to Him in great faith.

Oh, and by the way, Jesus *could* say the same thing about you. He could say it even about me. ***“Great is your faith.”*** That's because the greatness of faith is not based upon any strength or weakness within you, the greatness of faith is based *entirely* on the greatness of the one in whom your faith rests. Great faith knows who Jesus is and believes He has something for you. May we ever confess together with the Apostle Paul: ***“The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*** (Galatians 2:19) Amen.

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.