

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 13
August 30, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
Great Faith

—Matthew 15:21-28

In today's lesson, we follow Jesus to an unsuspecting place and person, but before I tell you that story, I have to tell you this one. While Jesus was still in Galilee, some Pharisees and teachers of the law came all the way from Jerusalem to file a complaint with Jesus. This was their problem: **"Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"** (Matthew 15:2). By observing these outward traditions, they thought it would cleanse and make them right with God. But Jesus called them out on their hypocrisy. He called them to repent of their sins and to find spiritual cleansing in him. They claimed to know God and they claimed to obey him, yet when God was standing right in front of them, they didn't repent and believe. They claimed that Abraham was their father but when the offspring of Abraham, the Son of David, was standing right in front of them they didn't recognize him. They had the Law and the Prophets, which testified about him, but they did not accept their testimony.

That's the backstory to today's lesson. After that little encounter, **"[Jesus left] that place and withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A 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.'**" His own people from the nation of Israel came to him crying "foul!" Now here is this gentile woman crying "Mercy!" **"Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!"**

But you keep reading, and you're maybe a little shocked or perplexed by Jesus' response. **"Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, 'Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.'**" The word that the disciples used indicates that the disciples urged Jesus to grant her request and send her on her way so she would stop bothering them. But **"He answered, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'**" It sounded like the disciples were more willing to help this woman than Jesus was. Then, **"The woman came and knelt before him. 'Lord, help me!' she said. He replied, 'It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'**"

Why does Jesus say what he says? Remember this: Jesus is a great teacher. There are plenty of times where he doesn't give an immediate answer. But as a tactful teacher he draws out a truth and lets his students learn and internalize the lesson. He asks a question or makes thought provoking comments like, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel..." and "It's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs..." Is he unwilling to help this woman? Is offensively comparing this woman to a dog? Jesus disciples seemed confused by the whole situation and maybe you are too.

But do you notice the one person who isn't confused or perplexed or offended by Jesus' words? The Woman! As tactful as Jesus' comment was is her response—**"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.**

And like that, Jesus, the master teacher, taught a valuable lesson. But who was the lesson for? I believe the lesson was even more for Jesus' disciples than it was for the woman. Yes, the woman clearly benefited from this encounter with Jesus and I'm sure her already great faith was strengthened. But the whole time the disciples watched this play out and hopefully learned a valuable lesson.

Yes Jesus came to the lost sheep of Israel. The promise of the Messiah was made to that nation and through that nation and so Jesus' ministry focused primarily on the people of Israel. But several times Jesus stepped outside of those boundaries. Once to a Samaritan woman beside a well, he offered living water. Another time he healed a centurion's servant and commended his great faith. And here is yet another object lesson for Jesus' disciples—salvation is not just for Israel. It is for all people. For the most part, Jesus ministry did not take him out of Palestine, but soon he would commission his disciples and send them to the ends of the earth, to all people.

There was another lesson to be learned—a lesson in humility. This woman was a stark contrast to the religious leaders of Jesus's day. They wanted to be justified before God by their traditions and by their ancestry. Even the disciples fell into the trap of pride—James and John sought a position of honor at Jesus left and right. This gentile woman doesn't play the merit game insisting that she was entitled to anything from the Lord. She was even content with being likened to a little dog that is over joyed when a mere scrap is tossed from the master's table.

She humbly realized that she came as a beggar before the Lord and even a crumb of God's mercy was a gracious underserved gift from her Lord.

Finally it was a lesson on great faith. Just days before, the disciples had been tossed around a stormy sea and they were frightened to death. Jesus approached them walking on water. Peter joined him on the water until he began to sink. And Jesus said, "You of little faith... Why did you doubt?" He said the same thing to the disciples another stormy night at sea. In their doubt, they forgot who Jesus was and what he could do. "You of little faith..." So then Jesus takes his disciples to a gentile region and shows them an example of great faith in an unsuspecting place and person.

The lesson Jesus taught through his encounter with this woman of faith is as much for us as it was for the disciples. What do you learn as the story unfolds? Maybe we learn that instead of crying out to the Lord for mercy, we too often cry out, "Foul! It's fair, God!" We too often file complaints instead of pleading for God's mercy. Or maybe it's a lesson in humility. Would we be ok with being compared to a little dog or would pride cause us to bristle and demand a higher status? Do we humble ourselves like that woman and fall at Jesus' feet, or do we ever approach God with a sense of entitlement? If you were to have a face-to-face encounter with Jesus during an average day, how would the Lord evaluate your faith? Would he more often say, "You have great faith!" like he said to that woman? Or would he more often say as he said to his disciples, "You of little faith... why did you doubt?" Jesus doesn't turn away those who come to him with a penitent and believing heart. But he sends away the proud and unbelieving.

Do you wish you had what the Canaanite woman had—a great faith? When we read accounts like this or other examples in the Bible of great faith, it often leaves us wishing we had a great faith like that. But don't just long to have her faith. Long for the one in whom her faith trusted—the Lord, the Son of David. This woman's faith was great because it rested solely on Jesus and his mercy. With great faith she confessed who Jesus was and she cried out trusting and clinging to his mercy. So really it's a lesson not merely about this woman's faith, but about the object of her faith—Jesus Christ. Whether faith is little or great, new or mature, faith receives the same Jesus and his forgiveness. Though this woman was not of the nation of Israel, she possessed Jesus and his mercy. You possess the same thing—Jesus and his mercy. As that woman came to Jesus in humility, as a beggar with nothing to offer, we approach the Lord in the same way. We come as beggars, not even worthy of the status of a household pet. We come with nothing in hand to offer but sin and guilt. Even a crumb of his grace would be more than we deserve. But we come to Lord not relying on our merit, but on his mercy. And in his mercy he tosses more than just a crumb of grace—He pours out every Spiritual blessing through faith in him.

So where does that great faith come from? Well, there again we learn another lesson through this woman. Where did her faith come from? She likely never met the Lord before this. And if that's the case, she never actually saw a miracle before. She heard the news about Jesus and she believed. She didn't just believe him to a miracle worker, but the Messiah, the Son of David. We haven't seen Jesus. We haven't seen his miracles. But that's not where comes from. Faith comes from simply hearing the message about Jesus. Great faith comes from hearing and learning of the great things Jesus has done for you. You want great faith. Don't look inside yourself. Look to Jesus. Fall at his feet as that woman did. He doesn't turn away anyone who comes to him with a humble and penitent heart. He mercifully pours out his love in abundance, even on us. Amen.