

“Great is Your Faith”

Matthew 15:21-28

What do you suppose Peter was thinking when Jesus said those words, “Woman, great is your faith!”? Jesus was talking to a Gentile woman, a Canaanite no less. Her ancestors were the scourge of the children of Israel. These people were despised by all upstanding Jews in their society.

When she came to Jesus pleading, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!” the disciple’s reaction was, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” The disciples did not want to be bothered with the problems of this Gentile woman. How quickly the disciples forget all that Jesus has taught them.

When confronted with the task of feeding the 5000, as we heard two weeks ago, the disciples said, “Send the crowds away, so they can go to the villages and buy themselves some food.” Jesus says, “You give them something to eat.” When people brought their little children to have Jesus bless them [Mt. 19:13], the disciples rebuked them: “Don’t bother the Master with these children.”

The disciples did not understand that the Good News that Jesus Christ brought into the world was for little children, for those in need, and

for those who are outcast by the “good” people in society.

All of the disciples would have at least raised an eyebrow to the fact that Jesus was talking to this woman with whom “good” people like them would hesitate to even make eye contact. But the words Jesus spoke, “Woman, great is your faith,” would have been especially disturbing to our beloved St. Peter. When Peter was confronted with tests of his faith, Peter continually failed: As we saw last week, he doubted the power of Christ while walking on the water. Jesus said, “O you of little faith; why did you doubt?” But this Canaanite woman, when tested by Christ, passes with flying colors.

In testing this woman, Jesus speaks words that you would not expect to hear from Him. He says: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” The disciples were probably thinking to themselves: “Amen! That’s why we want you to send her away.”

But in testing this Gentile woman, Christ is also teaching his disciples. This statement is in no way meant to be understood that Christ is establishing a kingdom based upon racial lines. This statement spoken more to the disciples than to this woman was a condemnation of the Jewish people.

The One, Almighty God, our Father in heaven, promised to send His only Son to His chosen people: the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to whom had been given the covenants, the law, the promises. But God’s chosen people rejected the Son and in doing so rejected the Father. St. Paul says in our reading from Romans 11, “As regards the Gospel, they (that is, the Israelites) are enemies of God.” Even those children of Israel who followed Jesus had “little faith” [Mt. 14:31], as is demonstrated

throughout the Gospels, and we particularly saw last week when Peter doubted as he walked on the water.

It is this Canaanite woman who has “great faith.” It is the Roman centurion, to whom Jesus says: “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” [Mt. 8:10]. Christ has come to establish a new kingdom.

Christ’s kingdom is not based upon any race or culture receiving special privileges when it comes to forgiveness and salvation – not even German Lutherans, but I am still checking on that (just kidding). The new kingdom of Israel does not solely consist of Jewish people. The old kingdom of Israel did not solely consist of Jewish people – just look at the genealogy of Jesus. Those Gentile dogs, like us, are welcome at the Lord’s table if they share the faith of Abraham – even if they don’t share the bloodlines.

With this understanding, Paul wrote to the Galatians: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” [Gal. 3:28-29].

It is through faith in Jesus Christ that I am a child of Abraham. It is through the Holy Spirit working through Word and Sacrament that you are a child of Abraham. It is through the washing away of sin in the waters of Baptism that God has created in you a clean heart and renewed a right spirit within you – as David says in Psalm 51 (words we often sing). The cleansing of your heart and renewal of your spirit in Baptism has made you a child of Abraham and a child of God.

Faith is created and faith is strong, not when we boast and rejoice in

the wondrous blessings of our life that God has given to us, not when we marvel at the goodness and complexity of God's green Earth and the celestial bodies in the sky which fascinate us (that being said, I am really excited about the eclipse on Monday/tomorrow), but rather faith is manifested when we cry out with the words of the Canaanite woman, "Lord...have mercy on me! Lord, help me!"

In humble obedience, we say to God, "I am a poor miserable sinner. I am unworthy of God's grace or forgiveness, but I desperately need it." It is in these words of contrition and repentance that we demonstrate our faith in the Son of God who carried the burden of our sin to the cross and grave.

We began this discussion with the question: "What do you suppose Peter was thinking when Jesus said those words, "Woman, great is your faith!"? It was just last week that we saw Peter display his "little faith" as he sank into the Sea of Galilee because he doubted and viewed Christ's power as being littler than the wind that confronted him. We witnessed Peter the apostle, one of the great men of the Christian church, demonstrate weakness in his faith when it was tested.

Here we see this outcast woman being commended by Christ as He says to her, "Woman, great is your faith." Christ demonstrates to Peter and to us that our faith is not measured by what our society deems as being valuable or correct. Great faith is seen in you when you are humbled before God and recognize that without Him you are lost.

Great faith is found in little children; it is found in you when you recognize that you are in need, and when you recognize that there is nothing good in you apart from God. Christ does not send you away. He hears your cries for mercy and He answers your prayer. Amen.