

The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

August 30, 2020

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Matthew 15:21-28 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. (ESV)

"Even Crumbs Are Enough"

Not much of a boxing fan in the first place, but I never saw Muhammed Ali fight. But I was asking a friend this week about him. Muhammed Ali claimed to be the greatest. Then he backed it up. He predicted he would win a boxing match and then he went out and did it. He was obviously a gifted athlete, but that wasn't what made him great. His confidence coupled with this training and hard work added to his determination to let his fists back up his mouth, made him truly great.

Outside the boxing ring we have different standards for greatness. People we love and look up to, people we admire and aspire to be like. We see them strong, confident, and self-assured. They come from humble beginnings and achieve success by hard work. And when it comes to great faith we see people who overcame obstacles or went into unfriendly environments and stayed strong. We think of Mother Theresa. A wisp of a woman who did extraordinary things for the poor and forgotten in India. We think of John Newton, the author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." For years he worked as a sailer on slave ships. But after his conversion to Christianity, worked tirelessly for the abolition of slavery. We think of Billy Graham, born to a family poor farmers in North Carolina but went on to preach to arenas and counsel presents from Harry Truman to Barack Obama.

We have our idea of great faith. Jesus gives us a completely different picture. In Matthew 15 we see great faith called out and put on display. Jesus shines the spiritual spotlight on a Canaanite woman. She comes groveling before Jesus, embarrassing his disciples. The disciples want to get rid of her the way we want to dismiss a telemarketer who somehow gets their hands on our cell phone number. And yet, I want to be so bold as to suggest you put her as one of your role models on the Mount Rushmore of faith. Bold. Persistent. Shameless she comes to Jesus. Completely confident in who Jesus is and what he can do for her. And when we embrace her as role model for great faith, we can be satisfied with Jesus. Even crumbs from Jesus will be enough for us.

This episode didn't appear out of the ether. Just like Jesus walking on water to greet his disciples right after miraculously feeding the crowds, here we see Jesus interaction with this Canaanite woman right after an altercation with Pharisees and scribes. Now, it's important to understand that even though we use "Pharisee" as a dirty word today, at the time of Jesus the Pharisees were heroes. At least they were the ones ordinary people put on a pedestal. They were the ones who had their faith figured out and actions totally dialed in. Regular people wanted to be like them if only they had the time to dedicate to God's Word and had the freedom to perform all the acts of obedience that the Pharisees and scribes could dedicate to their spiritual lives.

Matthew's arrangements of these episodes from the life of Jesus aren't any more accidental than Jesus' travel plans for his ministry. Greatness in faith for people at the time of Jesus was based on the purity of the Pharisees. So in his confrontation with these religious elite, Jesus pushes aside their traditions to demonstrate that what comes out of the heart is what makes a person unclean.

Even though this happened 2,000 years ago and half a world away, we still feel like we have to have some sort of purity to be great enough or even good enough to approach Jesus. In order to get close to Jesus we have to be Pharisee-ish in our obedience or Pharisee-lite in our performance for God. I see this pedestal understanding of great faith at work in the pressure to be good enough for Jesus before I can come to him.

One unfortunate result of this misunderstanding is that it actually pushes me away from Jesus at the moments when I need him the most. I realize how poorly I stack up against the Pharisees and scribes of this world. I feel so un-great about my faith. I feel insignificant compared to heroes of faith. I feel unworthy of coming to Jesus. If I am not good enough, then I should just keep my distance from Jesus.

There are other times when I feel pretty good about my faith. I'm upset about what's going on in the world. It feels unfair that I have to suffer when I don't deserve it. I might not qualify as a Pharisee, but I recognize I'm more qualified than the people who are making a mess of our world. And if God cares at all about who I am or what I've done, then I need to make sure he is aware of my spiritual credentials to answer my appeals. I promise to raise my faith game to the next level if he gives me the response I'm after.

Sometimes I live somewhere in the middle. Jesus is only important because we elect him to provide happiness and satisfaction on my terms.

Thankfully all these ways of approaching God are all out of whack. Because they are based on faulty assumptions about great faith, false understandings about who Jesus is and the great faith Jesus celebrates. But when we understand who Jesus truly is, then we will be satisfied with even the crumbs that fall from his hand.

Communication is pretty complicated today. I know we can be thankful for having phones and computers, getting text messages instantly and video conferencing to make sure important meetings happen. But we've been doing this so long, that we don't always have

much of a personal relationship with people on the other end of technology. If you started the school year in your teacher's classroom, it makes chatting with her on your computer a little easier. If you start the year only with the digitized version, you miss out on a lot. If you have a new boss or new college professor you've never met, you don't really feel like you know that person. Will they be fun and relaxed or strict and demanding? Do they even care about you or just getting the results they're after?

What makes the Canaanite woman a role model for great faith is her understanding of Jesus. She might be from a region outside the boundaries of Israel, but consistently addresses him as "**Lord.**" (Matthew 15:22,25,27) She may have come from the people expelled by the Israelites when they entered into the Promised Land, but she cries out clearly: "**Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David.**" (Matthew 15:22) If Jesus is Lord, then he is the covenant God of free and faithful love. The Lord comes to his people to save them and provide for their needs. The Son of David can be no one other than Israel's promised Messiah. She knew God would send Messiah to bring God's reign and rule to God's people by conquering hearts with grace rather than defeating armies or occupying forces.

Jesus did not come to give a pat on the back to the people who are making great strides and putting in enormous efforts to be good enough for God. Jesus certainly didn't come to drive away the people who have grown tired of trying to be good enough and have given up any effort at trying anymore. But neither did Jesus come to provide happiness and satisfaction on our terms. Jesus came to carry out God's plan to rescue humanity. Jesus came to be the answer to the sin that makes us less than great, completely unworthy actually.

And when we understand who Jesus truly is, then we will be satisfied with even the crumbs that fall from his hand.

My guess is that you might respect Mother Theresa and stand in awe of Billy Graham. Maybe this is the first you heard about the author of "Amazing Grace." My guess is that you have your own role models for great faith. Maybe your grandmother, your cousin, your neighbor. Role models not because they do amazing things or never do anything wrong, but because of the quiet confidence they demonstrate consistently in the middle of difficult days.

Jesus doesn't treat the Canaanite woman disrespectfully. He doesn't mislead the poor woman. But he uses this intrusion on his time away as an opportunity to instruct the crowds and disciples trailing after him. He wants to show the true nature of great faith.

Let's dig deep to see what made this Canaanite woman a candidate as a role model for great faith. First of all, she recognized her own great need and need to get to Jesus whatever it took. She begged for mercy from the Son of David because her own daughter was feeling the sad and painful consequences of living in this sinful world. Secondly, we see her kneeling before Jesus and simply pleading for help. She came to worship God's promised Messiah and offered a humble, worshipful, trusting prayer. And finally, when it sounds like Jesus is dismissing her, he doesn't argue or get defensive. Here's where we need to quibble with most translations. Jesus says it would be inappropriate to give the children's food to

their pets. She actually agrees with Jesus. She accepts Jesus' statement: **"Yes, Lord,...even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."** (Matthew 15:27) She acknowledges the path of Jesus' divine mission running through Israel. She exhibits simple, strong trust that God's way is the best way. And when she understands who Jesus truly is, then she can be satisfied with the crumbs that fall from his hand.

The last time I travelled to Salt Lake City for a pastors meeting, I brought back a box of cookies from a bakery called Crumbl. I didn't realize how much my wife appreciated this until she cut each cookie into quarters and rationed them out like we were in the middle of the Great Depression. We saved every last bite days later when there were only crumbs left in the box.

Any time God's people put great trust in who Jesus is and the mission he was sent to accomplish, that is great faith. And great faith is satisfied even with the crumbs that fall to us from Jesus. Like the Canaanite woman, we come for the crumb of healing. We beg for God's medical miracles for ourselves and the people we love. And great faith recognizes this is just a crumb that points us to the compassion of Jesus that brought him to earth to carry out his global, universal mission of rescuing sinner. The same compassion that cares for you personally, individually. We come to Jesus kneeling before him to receive help. And since Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, we eat up every crumb of aid in all the troubles we see in life. The crumbs of God's blessings worked through doctors and medicine, caring Christian friends and community. All the crumbs of knowing we can humbly, confidently come to him whenever we are overwhelmed and in over our heads. We come to Jesus for the crumb of mercy and find in Jesus true compassion and undeserved love for all sinners. Mercy in times of trouble is just a crumb that gives us a sample of God's always and eternal faithfulness to us in Jesus Christ.

Each crumb shows us Jesus is the greatest of all time. Understanding who he is and appreciating every crumb falling from Jesus, you can hear Jesus say to you: **"great is your faith!"** (Matthew 15:28)

+ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, to him be glory n the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen. +