

The True Model of Faith
Matthew 15:21-28, Pentecost 13, Year A
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This morning's Gospel passage is very difficult. On the face of it, here's what we see: Jesus is sought out by a woman in need. He insults her and only ultimately helps her because she won't stop badgering him. Jesus' behavior, it seems, is hardly in keeping with one we call "Lord." Some have tried to excuse Jesus here by claiming that he is testing the woman's faith, but to be honest, I find that interpretation of this passage noxious. God doesn't treat the hurting that way. So what is going on here? Well, to really understand this story we need to back up a bit.

Earlier in the fifteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel, Jesus finds himself—for about the hundredth time—confronted by the Pharisees. First century Pharisees, like all Palestinian Jews in that day, were faced with a real problem: secular culture was challenging their religious lives. (Does that sound familiar?) For years the Romans had ruled Palestine, and for centuries before that, the Greeks had been in charge. During all that time, Greek culture, with its idols, its materialism, and its tendency toward nakedness and permissive sex had filtered into Jewish life. What had traditionally been forbidden was now accepted without question. To the Pharisees, it must have felt as if their world was a ship slowly but surely filling with water.

The Pharisees responded to this threat with a vengeance. They were the keepers of the Jewish law, and they looked the part. They wore long, traditional robes and placed phylacteries—small leather boxes containing passages of scripture—on their foreheads and arms. They knew the Torah better than anyone, and they insisted that the only way to preserve Jewish life was to circle the wagons, keep outsiders and outside influences at bay, and declare unclean anybody who wasn't as rigorous in religious observance as they were.

This is why the Pharisees get so irritated by Jesus throughout Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' way of being Jewish couldn't be more different from theirs. He disregards many of the purity laws they cherish. He consorts with all sorts of people that they see as moral and cultural threats to Jewish life. While they set rigid boundaries to God's grace, Jesus throws boundaries to the wind and includes any and all within the family of God. And so at every turn the Pharisees debate Jesus over the particulars of the faith they share. They think of Jesus as uneducated rabble, wishing to humiliate and dismiss him, but again and again Jesus bests the Pharisees, silencing them with the depth and faith of his Gospel message.

An interesting and quirky exchange happens just before today's passage. Jesus accuses the Pharisees of using religious tradition to justify taking some of their income that should be used to care for their aging parents and instead sheltering it by designating it for the upkeep of the temple. It's an accounting trip worthy of Enron! In other words, the Pharisees manipulate their faith for all sorts of ends rather than directing it toward the weak and vulnerable—even those closest to them—who are in need.

Now, we need to remember that the disciples are with Jesus whenever these sparring matches between Jesus and the Pharisees occur. Frankly, the disciples are dunderheads. Throughout Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has tried to show them by his actions and reveal to them through his parables what it means to have faith, but they never seem to get it. The disciples probably feel a bit ambivalent whenever Jesus and the Pharisees debate. After all, the Pharisees answer quite clearly the question about how to be faithful to God. One is faithful by following all the right rules, observing strict and inflexible moral guidelines, and lashing out against any whom they perceive to be threats. Though rigorous, theirs is a simple faith, easy to understand and to follow. Jesus, on the other hand, when asked what faith is like tells strange stories about mustard seeds, buried treasure, and whatnot.

All of this gets us to this morning's Gospel passage. Jesus has just finished wrangling with the Pharisees, and as he often does after such encounters he leaves to rest and spend time away from the crowds. This time he leaves Jewish territory altogether, entering with the disciples into Gentile territory—a place where the Pharisees will definitely not follow him, since foreigners are to be avoided at all costs. As soon as Jesus arrives, a strange encounter ensues.

A Canaanite woman finds Jesus and throws herself at him. "Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David," she cries. She then tells Jesus a heartbreaking tale about her daughter who is possessed with a demon, a sad fact that would have made both her and her daughter outcasts in their community. Jesus is tired and haggard, and in a very human way he tries to ignore her, but she will not be ignored. She kneels before him, blocking his way. The disciples are visibly embarrassed by this woman who is doubly to be shunned—being foreign and having a crazy daughter, both stigmas in Jewish eyes—and they gruffly ask Jesus to send her away.

And that's when the story turns. Only upon hearing the disciples' remark does Jesus' exhausted stupor subside, and he realizes the moment that is before him. He launches into action, but not in the way we expect. "Woman," he says, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

She's not an Israelite, but she will not be moved. "Lord," she repeats, "Help me."

“It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Jesus parries.

But again the woman comes back, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs from the master’s table.”

It is at this point that I imagine a huge smile beams across Jesus’ rejuvenated face. “Woman,” he says, “Great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish.” And Matthew tells us that the woman’s daughter is healed instantly.

What has happened? Matthew’s intent is subtle, I believe, and it cannot be understood apart from Jesus’ prior debates with the Pharisees or from the disciples’ attempt to manhandle and dismiss this woman.

When the disciples ask, in essence, “You want us to get rid of her, boss?” Jesus realizes that they regard the Canaanite woman as disparagingly as the Pharisees would, as one who is outside the scope of God’s grace. Jesus throws them for a loop by engaging her in exactly the same way he has earlier engaged the Pharisees, except that here *he* takes on the role of the Pharisee in order to accentuate *her* as the model of faith. I can imagine the look on the disciples’ faces as Jesus begins his debate with this poor, uneducated woman in learned rabbinic style. I can also imagine how that look deepens when, whereas the Pharisees are repeatedly silenced by Jesus’ first words, the Canaanite woman stays with him and eventually triumphs.

The difference between learned Pharisee and poor, foreign woman is this: the Pharisees in reality operate out of fear and desperation, but the Canaanite woman speaks from true faith. That she does so gives her the strength to struggle with God for the good of her daughter. She acknowledges Jesus’ identity immediately upon meeting him—something the Pharisees never do—and she continually calls him “Lord” throughout their exchange. She does not ask for God’s healing grace to preserve some cherished, idolized way of life—as the Pharisees do—but rather for someone dear to her who is hurting and vulnerable.

It is Jesus’ hope that this real life situation will finally teach his disciples what faith looks like. It is a situation as topsy-turvy as the best parable! The conventional wisdom, that the learned and exalted Pharisees are the embodiment of faith, is upended. Faith’s true model, the one whose faith is so strong that she will struggle to know God against all odds, is the very least person that the disciples would expect: a foreign woman with a possessed child.

Why is this important to us? Because we are just as liable as the disciples to be mistaken in our models of faith. In our world as in theirs, it very often seems like our faith is being assaulted by the culture around us. Violence, promiscuity, and greed are so pervasive that in our reflective moments we become startled at how numb we are to them. We may react by looking

for guidance to those who would circle the wagons, who would have our religion stand in starker relief to the outside world by making religious observance more grandiose and morality more rigid, arguing that one's faith hinges on which side you fall on any number of moral questions. Yet such reactions reveal more about our fear than they do about our faith. And when such reactions make us blind to those around us who are in real spiritual need, ignoring them as unworthy of our attention, such reactions actually move us away from, not closer to, the God we so desire to know.

The Canaanite woman's engagement with Jesus shows us the way of faith. What does she do? She doesn't exhaust her spiritual energy being obsessed with the moralistic judgment of those around her. She doesn't waste time debating who has and who lacks God's favor. Instead, she seeks God's grace for the one in spiritual need, and she seeks strength and solace in Jesus, the God Incarnate in whom these things can be found. *This* is the way of faith for her, for the disciples, and for us. This is the faith I pray we come to know.

Amen.