

LET YOUR
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MATTHEW 15:21-28

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“... Great is your faith!” - Matthew 15:28

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When Jesus walked with His disciples among the hills and valleys and towns of Palestine, He often led them in directions they had not expected to go. On one occasion He chose to take His disciples through Samaria. It's helpful for us to remember that righteous Jews would have had no dealings with the Samaritans and normally would have gone around another way. Although there was grave danger to them in Jerusalem at the time of that final Passover, and although His disciples objected strenuously, Jesus chose to go there. It does not appear that Jesus did things pointlessly, and without doubt He had His own reasons for taking the directions He did and going the places He went.

In today's passage we have another example. From Galilee, Jesus led His disciples across the north-western border into Phoenicia. This was Canaanite country. The people who lived there were not Jewish. Jesus went there anyway. We can easily imagine that His disciples wondered why. Matthew tells us about only one event which happened during this brief Phoenician visit. And this even had enough meaning for Matthew, that he included it in his gospel which was intended for Jewish followers of Jesus.

Matthew tells us of a resident of the land, a Canaanite woman, who comes to Jesus begging Him to heal her seriously ill daughter. The disciples object to her, a woman, *AND* a foreigner *AND* a non-Jew speaking to Jesus and try to send her away. She persists, however, refusing to give up. At last her request is granted, and Jesus says to her, with deep emotion, “O woman, great is your faith!”

Great was the faith of this woman.

Her faith was taller than her fear in its groundbreaking and initiating quality. We have no historical evidence that Jesus was popular or even well-known in her country. Her reason for believing was not that someone else in her circle of acquaintances had done so already. Her faith was a mighty upwelling of her own soul and a heroic move to touch a power beyond herself.

Her faith was taller than her fear in its power to move her to action. It stood her up and got her going; it brought her to Jesus; and against all odds, against gender codes and ethnic barriers, it caused her to persist, to not give up.

Her faith was also taller than her fear in its consequences. Its results brought change. Her faith brought healing to her daughter. This outsider risked her faith for another outsider and the first consequence is that her daughter was healed. In a second consequence of her faith, the disciples gained a basic insight into the nature of Jesus' mission in the world and of their role in that mission. By her demonstration of faith, the disciples learned this: Anyone is welcome to come to Jesus, anyone can come from anywhere.

Let's look for a moment more on the drama played out on the Phoenician road that day. The stage had been set: Jesus, taking His disciples with Him, left Galilee, His own land, and has gone into this Gentile country. Why? Perhaps to teach among the Gentiles. Perhaps to teach among His disciples traveling with Him. As Jesus and His disciples walk along the road, His opportunity for teaching comes. It comes in the person of this distraught stranger, this foreign woman, asking for help. When, through her persistence, she finally reaches Jesus, she cries out, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon."

As I imagine it, I see Jesus glancing quickly around to be sure His disciples are listening, for what He's about to say is something He wants them to hear. Then He says this thing that rocks us to our core: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." On hearing this, I imagine the disciples turning agreeably to one another, looking wise, arms folded across their chests, and nodding approval. Jesus has just said precisely what they have assumed to be true: He is *their* Messiah. And the remainder of humanity? Well, they are the "outsiders" and have no part in this matter. Doesn't this woman know Jesus cannot do this for her, because His help is to be given to Israelites only?

But this woman doesn't accept the status quo; she will not believe it; her faith is taller than her fear; she will not give up. She runs forward, kneels before Jesus, pleading, "Lord, help me." I imagine that Jesus looks from the corner of His eye to see what effect all of this is having on those disciples standing close by. Then, speaking so that all may hear, He says, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs." And I see Peter and John, Philip and Andrew and all the rest whispering and saying among themselves: "See, just as we thought! He is *ours only*."

What in heaven's name is Jesus doing with these strange, uncharacteristic statements? Perhaps He's saying what He knows the disciples themselves would say and what they hoped for Him to say. I'm thinking that He wants them to hear what such opinions sound like when said out loud in plain language. He is building a situation of contrast: He is about to demonstrate a mighty truth, and He wants to do it against a background that will give it cameo clarity. And the woman is about to help Him do it.

Still, her faith unflinching, her courage undaunted, she does not give up. She presses her prayer to the point of argument. "Yes, Lord," she pleads, "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

At this point the whole scene abruptly changes. Jesus springs up, a vibrant vitality replacing the assumed air of indifference He has maintained up to now, and He fairly shouts, "O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire."

The disciples do not expect this; it takes them by surprise. This woman is one of the "outsiders," yet Jesus has let her in—into the scope of His caring, into His blessing, into the benefits of His power. Disquiet flows through the clustered group of disciples. They are startled, amazed, even shocked perhaps. Jesus has just let them know that the Master has come not just to them, but to the world.

Here, this brief roadside drama comes to an end. At this point, Jesus turns His group of followers back toward Galilee, and soon they are in their own land again. And what is it that has happened? Well, it is quite apparent that Jesus had gone into Phoenicia so that His disciples might discover an essential truth. The Master has done His teaching well: Anyone can come from anywhere to the Jesus and to the Kingdom, and the way for coming is the simple path of faith.

How well those disciples learned their lesson that day is something we really don't know. We do know that it will continue to play out as Paul takes the Gospel of Jesus beyond Jerusalem and the tribes of Israel into the Gentile Roman world. How well we have learned it may be a question of greater importance.

I hope we understand what Jesus is teaching concerning the worth of others and His mission to the whole world. Do we understand that people can come to God from wherever they are, that they have access to God no matter where they come from? I hope so. This is one of the fundamental insights of the Christian gospel: That followers of Jesus comprehend the worth of a person simply on the basis that he or she is a person.

When this Canaanite woman came to Jesus, He didn't ask who her parents were, He didn't inquire concerning her social identities, or her economic status, or what influence her family had in the marketplace, or if she would vote Republican or Democrat in the US election? None of this mattered. He knew she was non-Jewish, and this didn't matter either. She was a person with a troubled heart, a need, and she believed, and this was enough. Now, as then, with Jesus there are no "outsiders." And there shouldn't be with us either.

Within some limits, we may choose our friends, but never our brothers and sisters in Christ. They are ours, not by reason of what either we or they have done, but by virtue of who they are - like us, children of God. Some may be prodigal, wandering in far countries. Some may be invalid, with irregularities of mind or body or spirit. Some may be lost in dreary wastelands of defeat or in some dark wilderness of dead-end living. Not all may speak our language or be of our color or culture. AND all are welcome. From wherever they are, all may come.

In one respect all of us who come to Christ are alike: each comes from somewhere. How far away or how close by is not an issue. The only issue of importance is that we do come to our Lord.

And the road by which we come is faith. Wherever it is we start the journey, faith is the road that will lead us all the way to Jesus. However deep in sin, however far into the far country, however lost in the wilderness, faith is the way. No wasteland is so wide, no chasm so deep, that faith cannot bridge it across.

It was this Canaanite woman's faith that was taller than her fear which brought her to Jesus: she believed in Him, and therefore she came. And when others made it difficult for her, she kept coming. Although there was much to discourage her, she refused to be discouraged. It is faith which stands us up and gets us going, and it is faith that keeps us going until the object of quest is gained at last.

Faith is a bridge across any chasm, slender and frail maybe, but by it any soul can cross over. Faith is a road from anywhere, steep and rough perhaps, but by it any soul can come unerringly to the love of Jesus. Faith is a guide-rope along which those without sight may feel their way to touch the Redeemer's reaching hand.

Many centuries ago a Canaanite woman, whose name we do not know, demonstrated dramatically that the path of faith is the open way to God. And Jesus made it clear that day that by this path anyone may come from anywhere. Let me illustrate the truth of this. It is said that in ancient Greece, when the Grecian gods were supposed to dwell at the summit of Mount Olympus, an aged man, extremely ill, painfully made his way to the foot of that mountain, seeking the succor of the gods. Here, as he fell down at the temple gates entreating mercy, he was met by a priest who scoldingly said, "Be gone, old man; do you not know that the gods who sit atop Mount Olympus will not deign to look on the form of a dying man?"

Join me in thinking of another mount, not Mount Olympus, but Mount Calvary, the mount where Christ dies to redeem the world, the whole world. And think of Him who says, "Come unto me ... Whosoever will, let them come ..." He will welcome anyone who comes and will put His Hand of blessing upon everyone who does.

I hope we can understand the truth of this and that with every power at our command we will do everything we can to express the welcome of Jesus. Long ago, when people came seeking Jesus, two responses were characteristic: "Send them away," said some of the disciples, and "Bring them to me," said Jesus. Let's live with our faith taller than our fear and show them they are welcome.