

08/20/23
Matthew 15:21 – 28
Great Is Your Faith!

Sometimes it's helpful to hear scripture in everyday language, in common parlance. You may be familiar with Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of the Bible, The Message, that does this well. I came across Ralph Milton's paraphrase of Jesus' exchange with the Syrophenician (or Canaanite) Woman. Listen to the passage John just read to us as paraphrased by author and commentator, Ralph Milton.

"You can't go in there," said Peter.

"Well, I am going in there whether you like it or not."

"I said, you can't go in there, woman."

"I am going in. I have a sick daughter at home, and I am going in there and that prophet of yours is going to fix her. Now get out of my way before I give you a swift kick"

Peter jumped aside. The fierce eyes of the woman frightened him. He followed her into the house. "Jesus, I told her you didn't want to be disturbed. But she wouldn't listen."

"Jesus? That is your name? They say you are a prophet. They say you are a mighty prophet. Some say you are the Messiah. I'm asking you. No, I'm begging you, Jesus, Lord, son of David, help my daughter. She is desperately sick. If she doesn't get help, she'll die."

Jesus was sitting on a mat in a corner of the room away from the hot sunshine coming in through the opening. He was praying – trying to rest, trying to regain some strength after his verbal sparring with the Pharisees. Jesus was tense and tired and

annoyed at the woman for intruding. He kept his eyes closed, hoping she'd take the hint and leave.

"Look, I'm sorry. But I need your help, Jesus. My daughter is dying. I have no where else to turn! Please help me. I know you can."

"Just tell her to leave. She keeps bugging us." Said Peter and the other disciples. "I can't help you woman. I was sent to the people of Israel, to the Jews." Jesus' voice had the edge of utter exhaustion.

"Surely, if you are a man of God, you have come to all of God's people."

Jesus replied, "The children of Israel are God's people. You don't take bread that's meant for the children and feed it to your puppy, do you?" Jesus smiled just a little at that last comment, perhaps to soften the insult. His faint smile gave her hope.

"Right," she said, "but even the mutts in the street get to eat some of the scraps off the family table. Surely, Jesus, your God has enough love to give a small bit to those of us who are not Jewish!"

Jesus recoiled at that. His hand massaged his forehead as if to ease a headache. He felt the woman's piercing eyes. In his mind's eye flashed stories of his people, the wonderful humor of Jonah who was sent to bring God's message to the hated Ninevites, the moving story of Ruth, the foreigner, who became an ancestor to great King David, and the stories his own mother had told him of his birth—of foreign Magi who came bearing gifts.

"You're right," said Jesus barely above a whisper. . . "You're also courageous. Woman, great is your faith! Go home. Your daughter will be well."

"Thank you," she said, as her motherly concern went out to Jesus. "Go back to your prayer time. You look as if you need the rest."¹

It's a jarring passage and one that's difficult to make sense of fully. So, let's jump to the end and read it backwards. The passage concludes with Jesus commending the woman's faith. "Woman, great is your faith!"

What prompts this declaration from Jesus? "Great is your faith!"

Is it the woman's doggedness (no pun intended). Is it her stubborn refusal to be turned away by both the disciples, & Jesus? Is it her insistence that she won't take no for an answer? Is it her complete trust, belief, hope, prayer that Jesus has what she needs? Is it her intentional seeking out of Jesus? Is it her persistence and determination that she knows somehow Jesus has what she needs? Is it because she can see at first what even Jesus can't see? What prompts this declaration from Jesus? "Great is your faith!"

Maybe it's all of it because in the end, Jesus is wowed by the woman's faith.

Have you ever been wowed by someone's faith? Just blown away by the way that person or group of people believe, trust, and live out faith?

On the recent church mission trip to Fort Myers, Florida the group from our church heard faith testimonies of some of the folks running the organizations we were working with in

¹ From Ralph Milton's RUMORS #565, a free Internet 'e-zine' for Christians with a sense of humor." 8/30/09

Fort Myers. *Adventures in Mission* is one of the organizations we worked with and is headquartered in Harlem Heights (that's the name of the neighborhood in Fort Myers where we were working to rebuild houses that had been damaged by a hurricane in Sept. 2022). On our first day after arriving for orientation, the *Adventures in Mission* coordinator, Sara shared with our group that she and her family were called by God to pack up everything from their home (I can't remember where they lived previously but it wasn't FL) and work fulltime in missions. Sarah & her husband Chris have 3 young children and Sarah shared with us that she heard this call clearly but didn't know where the family would be sent, nor did she know exactly what kind of work they would be doing. They purchased a recreational vehicle to live in and decided to wait to hear further instruction. A few days after they bought their RV they got word of the need in Fort Myers, FL through the parent company of *Adventures in Mission*. The way Sarah described her family's call to us sounded as though the Lord was guiding her every move and she and her family were operating solely on faith.

Another volunteer with *Adventures in Mission*, Eddie shared a similar testimony with me one day on the work site. He was from TN and took a group of single adults to Fort Myers from TN to serve with *Adventures in Mission* in Harlem Heights and while working Eddie felt called to stay in Fort Myers and work full time with *Adventures in Mission*. He said, if he didn't have to drive the group he came with back to TN he would have just stayed in FL. Subsequently Eddie did move to FL and was living at the *Adventures in Mission* compound and working with groups like ours receiving no monetary compensation just living off of the donations of others and off of what he called

his “Jesus fund” which I understood to be his life’s savings. Eddie told me he had been waiting for the timing to work out so that he could dedicate his life to serving God.

I know we are not all called to sell our belongings, purchase an RV, and see where the Lord sends us, but I do believe we are all called to step out in faith in one way or another. We are all called to reach out to Jesus and seek his guidance and healing for our lives, the lives of those around us, and for our nation and world.

What’s your faith like these days? I’m going to suggest that I think it’s hard to be faith filled amid all of the destruction, devastation, difficulty, and disaster that swirls around us. How do we, how can we remain faith filled and reach out to Jesus when faced with all of the issues we confront daily as individuals going about our lives, as a country, and as global citizens?

- Each one of us knows *individually* what we’ve got going on. For example, school’s starting back up again and with that comes all of the accompanying stress and decisions that go along with a new school year for students, parents, grandparents, family dynamics, and health. Some may face the struggle of illness, divorce, physical frailty, addiction. It takes a concerted effort to reach out to Jesus in faith in the middle of the individual struggles that batter and beat us down.
- *Nationally* we face the fact that Christianity is on a deep decline. It’s harder and harder to find a common faith language with friends, colleagues, and

- acquaintances. It's easy and natural to ignore the topic of faith in a friendship that isn't forged at church.
- Also, *nationally* we face the stress of potentially having the same two candidates on the ballot for president this cycle as we did 4 years ago. That possibility causes many in our country to dig in heels and become polarized around issues of left and right, liberal and conservative that divide our nation and put a strain on our faith in the governing of our republic.
 - *Internationally* the threats of Global Climate Change and of nuclear annihilation are regularly reported on in the news and the ripple of that reporting reverberates.
 - Taken together these individual struggles, national issues and international threats, are enough to cause us to throw up our hands in despair and wonder what claiming of faith, or living out faith may have to do with anything of consequence.

This is when we return to the Syrophenician or Canaanite Woman who is given those labels, Syrophenician or Canaanite because she's not in the in crowd. She's not one of the chosen people. She's not wealthy, known, familiar, or anything that would lead hearers of this passage to think she's got power, purchase, punch, or particularity. All she's got is faith and it seems to Jesus, a ton of it. And when she's desperate she holds on to Jesus as a lifeline. She will not let Jesus go until she receives his blessing, or until her daughter does. That tenacious faith, that reaching out to Jesus, seeking him out in her time of need, that belief that he has what she needs, that unwillingness to be deterred, that

doggedness is what causes Jesus to say, with seeming bewilderment and adoration, “woman, great is your faith!”

I wonder if Jesus or if anyone else would be able to say that about your faith or mine. I wonder if we might go into the week with this woman on our mind. This woman who had no business having the faith that she did, but sought Jesus, spoke up and spoke out.

I wonder what that kind of faith might look like today for you and me. Maybe it looks like the faith of Sarah and Eddie and others who sell all to follow Jesus. Or maybe it looks like the faith of the youth and adult volunteers who set aside a week of their Summer to help those who’ve lost their homes in a hurricane. Or maybe it looks like the person who stands up to injustice when they see it happening, or, stands up to a bully at school and calls out bad behavior. Or maybe it looks like the person that says, “I will pray for you, right now & right here, so that you can face your chemo, your treatment, your issue, knowing you’re not alone.”

Let’s you and I think on it this week—let’s think on where our faith needs building up & what that might look like. Then let’s meditate not only on our own faith, where it needs building up & what that might look like, but also this week let’s meditate on the faith of our Lord. We’ll have an opportunity in bit to think about how it is we might reach out to Jesus so that our faith may be strengthened, so that we can find courage and show it this week in our faith.

As you hear the flute music and then as we sing the hymn, *Great Is thy Faithfulness*, may we uncover ways to seek Jesus and claim courageous faith even as we're reminded that, "all we have need of God's hand has provided. Great is THY faithfulness, Lord, unto us."

Amen