

St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost
August 18, AD 2002

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹ *Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.* ²² *A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession."*

²³ *Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, "Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us."*

²⁴ *He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."*

²⁵ *The woman came and knelt before him. "Lord, help me!" she said.*

²⁶ *He replied, "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs."*

²⁷ *"Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."*

²⁸ *Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (NIV)*

What's So Great about this Faith?

Dear brothers and sisters of Christ,

That's quite a compliment: "You have great faith!" And Jesus is the one giving it out. He's not easy to impress. When Jesus gives a compliment like this, we all sit up and take notice. Right? If Jesus met us, wouldn't we want him to say the same thing?

So **what's so great about this faith?** Why is Jesus so impressed?

If we were to read only this last verse—the one where Jesus says, "You have great faith"—and we were to imagine what kind of person Jesus was talking to, what kind of person would we construct? Someone with a smile on his or her face, maybe. Someone brimming with confidence. Someone with the world by the tail, triumphant, victorious. It's would have to be someone like that, wouldn't it? Someone with "great faith"?

Not quite. When we look at this person with great faith, we see a woman hanging on by a thread. We see a woman who is desperate. We see a woman who doesn't fit the mold, someone who doesn't seem to be the type of person Jesus would hang around with. His disciples don't even want her there. Yet Jesus says that she (and not the disciples) has "great faith."

So if it's not her appearance, her demeanor, her social status that makes her faith great, what is it? Let's answer that question in this way: What makes her faith great is that it's not full of itself but full of Jesus and the promises of God.

This faith is not full of itself

What makes this woman's faith great, first of all, is that it's not full of itself.

This woman realized right away that she had no right to claim anything from Jesus. Did you notice the request she made of him—even before she told him about her daughter, who was possessed by a demon? Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! "Have mercy on me." She didn't come claiming that she was entitled to a special request. She didn't claim that she deserved anything. In fact, when people say, "Have mercy on me," they're usually asking that they *not* get what they deserve. So it was with this woman. She knew that she deserved to have Jesus turn his back on her. So she came to Jesus pleading for his mercy.

And what did Jesus do? He pushed her even farther! He stonewalled. Jesus did not answer a word. And then he commented, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." The woman knew it was true. Ever

since 2000 BC, when the Lord had promised to Abraham that his line would eventually produce the Promised One, God had given special attention to the Jewish people, to Israel. We heard in one of the Scripture readings last week the special blessings God gave to Israel: Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises. Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ... (Romans 9:4,5) It was the Jewish line that would produce the Christ, and they would have dibs on believing in him. But this woman was a Canaanite. They had been the enemies of Israel! And she was now living outside the borders of the land, up in what is now Lebanon. She had no right to demand anything from Jesus. But when pressed, would she admit that?

Maybe there was some pride in this woman. Maybe she would turn away, disgusted at this poor customer service.

But she didn't. She had been trailing Jesus and the gang, but then she ran up in front of them. She knelt down to stop them all in their tracks, and she offered another urgent plea: Lord, help me!

And now Jesus gives in, right? Wrong. He presses still more! It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs. It's not right to take a good gift intended for God's people, Israel, and give it to outsiders, little Gentile lap dogs.

What does she do now? Does she go away, taking with her the last shreds of self-respect? No. She stays. And she admits Jesus is right. She admits to being nothing more than a little dog in the kingdom of God. Yes, Lord, she says. She admits that she has no right to claim anything from Jesus.

Did you notice in our service today that we echoed the cry of this woman? The Christian church has been doing so for centuries. "Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy." We too, like the Canaanite woman, bring a request with us: grant us forgiveness. Like the woman, we can claim no right to anything. We confessed, didn't we, that all we deserve is God's punishment, both now and in eternity? Like the woman, we are asking God to not give us what we deserve. "Lord, have mercy." What more appropriate prayer is there for the hearts and mouths of sinners like us?

What's so great about this faith? It's not full of itself. This woman comes to God empty-handed. She does not claim to deserve anything good from God. She asks only for mercy.

This faith is full of Jesus and the promises of God

Something is there, though. Something drew this woman to Jesus. Something kept her going.

Everything the woman saw told her that God didn't care. The back of Jesus turned to her. The contemptuous glares and disgusted whispers of the disciples. Yet she kept going, driven by something unseen.

What that something was we get a hint of in the woman's first plea to Jesus. "Lord, have mercy," she had said. Do you remember what she called Jesus? Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! That name, Son of David, tells us that this woman knew something about who Jesus was. She knew that he was a descendant of the renowned Jewish king, David. She likely also knew that a special descendant had been promised to David: a king who would reign forever.

We find out more about what the woman knew in her answer to Jesus' calling her a dog. "Yes, Lord," she said, "and in fact the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She knew that even though she wasn't a Jew, even though she was not numbered among the chosen people of God, that there was still something for her.

She perhaps knew that when God had promised the Savior to Abraham, God had said this: all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Genesis 12:3) All peoples (even Canaanites!) would receive blessing from the offspring of Abraham, from the Son of David. That's what the Lord had promised. That promise was one God reiterated over the centuries. In our first Scripture reading today, in fact, we heard God say that his would be a house of prayer for all nations. (Isaiah 56:7)

It must have been that promise that drove this woman to cry out again and again to Jesus. She knew that God had made a commitment to her: he had promised his love and forgiveness and a place in his family for all who would believe on him, regardless of their social status or racial background. He had

promised. And she knew that he would make good on his promise. Even though everything she saw told her that God didn't care, her heart was zeroed in on his promises.

That's really what makes faith great. It's not our willpower. It's not our indomitable spirit. It's not our resolve or our strength. It's the promises of God. It's the love that moved him to make promises of good things to us. It's God's willpower and resolve to do what said he would do for us—that's what makes faith great.

This explains why this woman, who looks so desperate, receives such high praise from Jesus. She forgets herself. She abandons all claim to anything from God. She knows only that God has made a promise to her. She acts, trusting that promise.

Well, if it's the words and promises of God that make faith great, let me ask you a question: How will our faith become like that woman's?

Think about it. If it's the words and promises of God that make faith great, how will our faith deepen and grow? How will we ever love God more dearly and follow him more nearly? By listening to the words and promises of God. By listening to and getting into what he says to us in his holy Book. By listening to his most important promise of all: that we are cleansed, washed of all our guiltiness and sin, and made his own people. By listening to the message that his body and blood proclaim: Jesus keeps his promises, even if it kills him.

Last week was our Vacation Bible School. About fifty children gathered throughout the week here at church. The question each year for VBS is, What do we teach the children? There are plenty of good things in the Bible they should know. Which ones shall we choose? Remember, we want to build the faith of these children. We want to deepen the trust they have that God has good in store for them. What shall we teach them? We simply teach them what God has already done to seek and to save sinners like us. We teach them the great acts of deliverance that God has brought about. We teach them about the promises that God has made and already kept, especially the one about sending someone to substitute for us under the penalty for sin. When children hear God's promises to them, and when they see that God has a perfect track record in keeping his word, then God grows their faith in him.

The same goes for grownups. The more contact we have with the promises of God and message about how God keeps his promises, the greater our faith will be.

I'd like to test your memory. I realize that if I asked many of you what you had for breakfast this morning, I'd probably stump you. But here goes. Do you remember last Sunday's sermon? Peter walked on water with Jesus, but when he saw the wind and waves all around him he began to sink. Is it coming back to you? Do you recall what Jesus called Peter after they were both in the boat? Jesus called Peter "you of little faith." And this is one of Jesus' closest disciples! But now today he says to a desperate foreign woman, "You have great faith!"

What's the difference?

That night on the Sea of Galilee, when Peter came walking out on the water to Jesus, at first Peter did okay. Why? Because his eyes were on Jesus, and his mind was full of Jesus' word, his simple command, "Come." But when Peter started looking around at the wind and its effects, his faith faltered. Peter suddenly became more focused on himself and his feelings than on Jesus.

But this woman's heart and mind were filled only with the promises of God. She had raw emotions, yes, but her attention was on what God had promised her. These promises kept her going.

Let's fill our minds with the words of God. For the word of God is living and active. (Hebrews 4:12) These words give us faith and keep faith alive. And by this faith we are saved. Amen.