

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my strength, and my redeemer.

I don't know about you, but I am getting worn out by the news at the moment. The wars in the middle east and the Ukraine that never end, the antics of some politicians, and the cost of living that keeps going up, to name just a few things. It's exhausting and also inescapable.

Which is why I find today's gospel reading (Matthew 15:21-28), so refreshing, and healing; a true blessing.

It is a simple story about a woman who couldn't care less about all the politics and division in her world. She cares only about her daughter. And her story reminds us of what faith and prayer and love look like when we are faced with real, personal adversity. It is a story that brings us back to the basics, of what it means to trust in Jesus.

Eugene Peterson, the author of the popular Bible translation 'The Message,' once said that for Christians, the Bible should never be the footnote to the news of the day; but rather the day's news should always be just the footnote to the Bible. *“If we forget that the newspapers are footnotes to Scripture and not the other way around,”* he said, *“we will finally be afraid to get out of bed in the morning.”* Today's headline is never to be found in your news source. That is always just the footnote.

Scripture is the headline. So what's today's headline? We might put it this way: *An unnamed Canaanite woman is described by Jesus as having great faith.*

Just last week the leader of the disciples, Peter, was told that he had very little faith. This week, an anonymous woman, who is not even Jewish, is told that she has great faith.

So what is it about her faith that makes it great? And how can we have faith that is great like hers? When Peter was caught in the storm in last week's reading, he took his eyes off of Jesus and began to sink. When this woman is caught in a very different storm, she stayed focused on Jesus, and fell to her knees before him. That's the kind of faith that I want. So, what makes her faith great? Let's look at three things that she shows us as being necessary to have this faith; and one thing that is not.

Great Faith Requires a Great Need

First of all, this woman's story reminds us that great faith often requires a great need. If we don't need Jesus greatly, then how can we ever have great faith in him?

Throughout the New Testament, the people who show the greatest faith in Jesus are the ones who need him the most. The ones who are “poor in Spirit,” as Jesus himself describes it. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Great faith requires being poor in spirit. It requires recognizing that we need Jesus. Realizing that we don't have it all figured out. We can't get it right on our own. We can't fix ourselves, our families, or our world, on our own. We need Jesus.

This woman is desperate. Her daughter is being tormented by a demon. And she will do anything for her daughter. Even turn to a Jew. She will humble herself and embarrass herself. She will do whatever it takes, because her need is that great.

Can we agree that we have some pretty big needs in our world today?

But need by itself is not enough.

Great Faith Requires Knowing Who Will Fill that Need

Great faith requires a great need. But there are lots of people in our world who know that they need something. But they don't know exactly what they need. So they try this, and they try that, but nothing seems to satisfy. It seems like a lot of our world's attention is focused on what will fill our need.

But the truth is that there is a hole in the heart of our world that can only be filled by Jesus. Yes, great faith requires a great need. And, yes, our world has a great need. But that need won't be filled by anything but Jesus. The Canaanite woman has great faith, not just because she is desperate for help, but because she comes to realize that her help can only come from Jesus. Great faith means recognizing our great need, and turning to our great Saviour. Knowing what we need something, and knowing who alone can fill that need.

Great Faith Requires Persistent Trust

But there is a third element necessary to having great faith. When this woman first turns to Jesus, he ignores her? He doesn't answer her at all, at first. That seems strange, doesn't it?

But haven't you ever felt that way when you've prayed? I know that I have. We know that God is never truly absent, and that God hears all of our prayers. But sometimes the only answer we seem to hear is silence. And that makes it seem as though God is absent. And that can test and challenge our faith.

This Canaanite woman has great faith, according to Jesus, and we see it in her response to Jesus' silence. When Jesus responds to her request with silence, she responds to his silence with faith. In the face of silence, she does not give up. She does not turn from Jesus. Instead, she kneels before Jesus, and says again, “Lord, help me.”

Great faith does not give up, but persists, even when there seems to be little reason to do so. Maybe Jesus intentionally ignored this woman – to show his disciples what a great and persistent faith looks like.

Great Faith Does Not Require Our Worthiness

Great faith, as this woman shows us, requires a great need, and trusting that Jesus alone can meet that need, and it requires persistent trust in God even when God does not seem to be responding to our prayers. But there is one thing that great faith does not require. And we see that through the strange twist that this story takes.

When this woman finally does get Jesus' attention, he gives her an answer she doesn't want to hear. He says to her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And she was not one of those lost sheep. She was a Canaanite, not a Jew. She worshiped the “wrong god,” and Jesus' mission was not yet for people like her. There would come a time when his mission would be for all nations, and for all peoples, after the resurrection. But not yet. Now, he has come to look for the lost sheep of Israel.

So, why would Jesus say that to her, and what does that have to do with us? Sometimes, when we don't get the answer we want in prayer, we can blame ourselves. It is our fault. We haven't lived a good enough life. We haven't had enough faith in God. We have disappointed God in some way. Who are we to even dare to ask God for help? Like the Canaanite woman, we can wonder if we are really worthy to have our prayers answered.

But here's the good news that this Canaanite woman teaches us: Our worthiness has nothing to do with it. She is not worthy. And neither are we. But it doesn't matter. Great faith doesn't require us to be worthy. Because great

faith turns us to the only one who can make us worthy. Great faith turns us to the one who died for us, to make us worthy to stand before him.

By telling the Canaanite woman that she isn't worthy, and then answering her prayer, Jesus is telling us that it is not about our worthiness. It never was. It's about grace. The simple gift of God's love given to all of us by God's Son. Great faith doesn't rely on our worthiness, but it's also not stopped by our unworthiness. Because great faith relies on God. Nothing more and nothing less.

Closing

To this unnamed woman, Jesus says: “Woman, great is your faith.” Not because she was worthy of it. But because she needed Jesus. And she knew it. And she persisted when everything, and everyone, was telling her to give up.

It may not be the most important story in the world, in the grand scheme of things. And it's not a new story. It certainly won't make tomorrow's headlines. But, then again, think of how many people will be hearing this story today – Christians all around the world. People of all races and nations. Young and old. Rich and poor. Sick and well. People like you and me, who might be overwhelmed by the stories in the news these days. All around the world today, people will be hearing about a Canaanite woman, whose name we do not know, who showed us what it means to have great faith. So, maybe this story is the most important story in the world today. The one that should be given the headlines. And I, for one, am thankful to have heard it.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Credit: James Lawrence (parts)