

St. Luke's Evangelical Lutheran Church -- Watertown, WI
Pastor Mark Gartner
Sermon for Pentecost 13 – September 9th and 11th, 2011

Matthew 15:21-28

²¹Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²²A 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.”

²³Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”

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

²⁶He 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.”

²⁸Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Dear fellow children of God,

A little boy had made a little sail boat. He was so excited he immediately took it down to the pond to try it out. It didn’t take long and the sail boat got out of the little boy’s reach. Afraid that he would never get it back, he asked a bigger boy to try and get it back for him. Without saying a word, the bigger boy began throwing stones out on the pond. Well, you can imagine how the little guy felt when he saw that. He just thought the bigger boy was being mean to him instead of trying to help him. But the longer the little boy watched, the more he realized that the bigger boy was actually helping him to get his sail boat back. For he was not throwing stones at the sailboat but beyond it. Each stone made a little wave that moved the boat that much closer to the shore so that the little boy could pick up his sail boat by himself. So every throw of those stones proved to be helpful, even though the little boy could not see that right away.

Sometimes there are things that occur in our life that appear to be setbacks and discouragements. But as we wait for things to unfold as this little boy did, we begin to see things differently. Each trial in our life is like the casting of stones upon the quiet waters of life and it is meant to bring us that much closer to our Lord. This was very true of the Canaanite woman in our text. At a time when most of us would have walked away from the Lord in disappointment, this woman grew stronger in her faith. She endured her trials, which were a test of her faith. What was her secret? How was this possible? This we will learn as we listen closely to the conversation that took place between Jesus and this woman and apply it to our life. Then let it be said of us as it was said of this woman: “**You have great faith.**” So the real question for today is:

Sermon Theme: What Is Great Faith?

- 1. Admitting when we are helpless**
- 2. Trusting God is our only help**

Jesus and his disciples had left Galilee and came into a heathen country known as Tyre and Sidon, which is Lebanon today. People who lived there were known as Canaanites because they were descendants of the people who had at one time lived in the Holy Land. But because of their idolatry which even involved the worship of the devil and the offering of human sacrifices, God had them forced out so that they would not contaminate his chosen people. Jesus chose this area and time for rest and seclusion and for instructing his disciples. But even here, outside the borders of Palestine, the Lord’s presence was

known. He was approached by a Canaanite woman. Although she grew up in a heathen environment, she had heard of Jesus and had been led to place her trust and confidence in him.

She was in dire need of his help. She cried out, “**Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.**” There was nothing that this woman could do. There was no cure for such an affliction. It was only a matter of time before her daughter would be destroyed at the hands of this evil spirit. And it was in this total helplessness that this woman of Canaan was guided to Christ. She came and fell at Jesus’ feet and said, “Lord, help me. Have mercy on me.” She was not claiming to be worthy of his help. She did not point out all kinds of reasons as to why Jesus should help her by dropping everything and coming to heal her daughter.

She knew that she was unworthy and helpless. That right there is the mark of a great and strong faith. Scripture is very clear on this point that by nature we are totally, completely helpless in the sight of God. The only thing we can present to God is a record full of sin and transgression. God demands perfection and anything short of that puts us into a state of helplessness. We look into God’s law to see what he requires in our love for him and for one another and we realize how much we have failed. And just as this woman cast herself on the mercy of the Lord in her utter helplessness, so must we in regard to our sins.

But it is not enough to just recognize one’s helplessness. This in itself would not have brought any relief to this woman. But by God’s grace she was directed to the only One who could help her in the time of need. She even addressed the Lord as the Son of David. From the miracles he had performed she knew that Jesus was more than a mere man. He was the Lord, the Messiah, the Savior. She knew that she would receive help.

But first came the test of her faith. After pleading for help our text states: “**Jesus did not answer a word.**” Is that right? That’s what it says. The Savior never appeared so cold as he does here. His lips that were so accustomed to saying kind words were sealed. His ears that were always open to the faintest cry for help were deaf here. His hands that were forever reaching out to help people were withdrawn from this woman. Jesus is like a fountain of love but he appeared to be frozen here – not a drop.

But Jesus did this to test her faith. Was it real or like a sounding brass? Are there not times when it seems that our prayers for help also go unheard? In times of trouble we may call upon the name of the Lord and nothing seems to happen. In times like that Satan is eager to convince us that God is not concerned about us and Satan whispers in our ear: “Why don’t you give up? God has more important things to do than to listen to you.” One would think that this Canaanite woman would have just given up. As she cried out to the Lord, he just kept right on walking. But she also kept right on following him. So this woman not only had a humble faith but also a persevering faith.

And was Jesus pleased with her persistence? It was for that very reason that he later said, “**Woman, you have great faith.**” And Jesus is pleased to have us keep praying when our prayers for help seem to go unanswered. We don’t give up. But keep asking, keep seeking, keep knocking, with the confidence that the Lord will hear and answer in his own way and at the time he knows is best. The Canaanite woman kept on praying because she believed in God’s mercy. And it is that same mercy which convinces us to persevere in prayer. Even though he may not answer at once, we know that he cannot remain silent for long.

This woman’s faith was tested even more when Jesus finally did answer her. He replied, “**It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.**” In this response Jesus was stating that his ministry was primarily to the Jews and not to the Gentiles. He compared the Gentiles to house dogs, which have to eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table. How harsh and unkind these words must have sounded to this mother. We would not be surprised at all if we were told that this woman walked away with a broken heart. But she didn’t. She did not give up. She admitted that she was like a house dog, not worthy of the Lord’s blessings.

Would we have done the same if we were in this woman's shoes? To be humble is not part of our nature. We are more inclined to be proud and boastful. Our Old Adam would have us believe that we deserve to be helped. But we, too, must confess, "Lord, we are undeserving of your blessings. We can approach you only by your mercy."

So even though Jesus did carry out his ministry mainly among the Jews, God's chosen people, she believed that he had come to be the Savior of the world and that he would have a blessing for her too. She said, "**Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.**" Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a faith like hers? When things go well, it is easy to believe that God is in heaven and that he loves us. But when things turn against us, when wealth and health disappear, when happiness is hard to find, or when death takes a loved one, that's a different matter. Then we are tempted to question God's ways and doubt his power and love. When trials come our way, they are a true test of our faith. God can also use those moments to draw us closer to him and to strengthen our faith.

One time a boy went with an elderly farmer to cut down some strong hickory trees for ax handles. As they walked through the woods, they noticed many strong-looking, young hickory trees. The boy said, "They look good and strong for ax handles." But the farmer said, "Let's go to the top of the hill where the trees have been exposed to more severe weather. We will find the trees much stronger there where they have been rocked back and forth by the wind. These trees will make much stronger ax handles." Is it not true that when we are exposed to the storms of sickness, sorrow, trials, and troubles, when we are rocked back and forth by the fierce winds of adversity, the Lord can draw us closer to him and strengthen our faith through his Word and sacraments?

No wonder the Lord said of this woman, "**Woman, you have great faith. Your request is granted. 'And her daughter was healed from that very hour.'**" That night there were three happy people in Tyre and Sidon – the little girl who was healed, her mother who had shown such great faith, and our blessed Savior. Lord, strengthen our faith and may we hear you say of us, "Oh woman, oh man, oh child, you have great faith!" Amen.