

## ***A Crumb is Enough***

Matthew 15:21-28

August 17, 2008

### **I.**

Today's Gospel reading about the Canaanite woman has several parts to it. One of the most important is how it portrays her faith. And it reminds me of a contemporary story about another woman's faith.

Just before Christmas a woman went shopping at the mall. She had gone through a hard day, a chilly wind was blowing, and rain had started to fall. She drove into an overcrowded parking lot and didn't see any open spaces. So she started to pray as she turned into the row nearest the front door of the store. She said, "Lord, you know what kind of a day I've had, and there's just one last thing to do. Please give me a parking space close to the building so I don't get soaked." The words were barely out of her mouth when she saw the backup lights of a car come on at the end of the row. It was the best space in the lot, right next to the handicapped spots and close the front door. She drove straight to it and as she pulled in she said, "Never mind Lord, something just opened up."

What's wrong with that picture? She didn't have much faith that God would answer her prayers, did she? And when she got what she prayed for, she didn't think God had anything to do with it.

This stands in sharp contrast to the faith of the woman in today's reading. And, as I will elaborate upon later, it also stands in contrast to last week's Gospel. As you recall from last week, Peter tried to walk on water, and Jesus told Peter that he started to sink because he had little faith. In today's reading, however, Jesus told a woman who was a complete stranger that she had great faith. What was the difference?

### **II.**

At the outset it's important to understand that in today's reading Jesus was in enemy territory, so to speak. When he and the disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee as we heard in the Gospel last week, they left the familiar lands of their Jewish roots and entered into pagan lands; the lands of the Gentiles.

And while they were there, a woman described as a Canaanite, which meant that she was a Gentile rather than a Jew, came to Jesus for help. Her daughter was tormented by a demon and she wanted Jesus to heal her.

The disciples urged him to send her away because she was shouting, although there probably was more to it than that. And we don't know if the disciples meant that Jesus should send her away empty handed, or if he should heal the daughter and then send her away. In any event, however, Jesus told them that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

What does this mean? Was Jesus being discriminatory? Some background is helpful. With a few exceptions, Jesus' ministry during his lifetime was to the Jews, not the Gentiles. Only after the resurrection did it become clear that Gentiles were included in the promise of salvation. St. Paul, as he proclaimed the Gospel and established churches several years later, was the preeminent missionary to the Gentiles.

And one reason for Jesus' focus on the Jews was, as Matthew said earlier in his Gospel, that Jesus came to fulfill the law not to abolish it (5:17). His mission was to offer salvation by faith rather than through human efforts of complying with the law. And "the law" in this context,

meant the Old Testament law given to Moses on Mt. Sinai, which was the law that governed the lives of the Jewish people, not the Gentiles.

So it was necessary for Jesus to come first to the Jews as the Messiah. The message of salvation by faith had to be offered to them before he died. To have offered salvation to everyone equally at the beginning could have been misunderstood. What would Gentiles have thought if Jesus told them he came to fulfill the law when the law did not even apply to them? Thus, God's plan of salvation meant that the Gentiles would wait for the resurrection as the defining event for them.

### **III.**

End of background. On with the story. Even though the woman heard Jesus tell the disciples that he did not feel called to minister to her, she still said, "Lord help me." And then he responded with something that seems rather harsh. He said to her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs." Jesus was speaking in metaphors here. Children's food described God's blessings for the Jews, and the reference to dogs was a dismissive way of referring to the Gentiles.

What about this? Was Jesus being politically incorrect? Theologians and scholars have differing opinions. Many believe that he either was testing her faith, or else was emphasizing, for the benefit of the disciples, that he was considering doing something unusual by healing a Gentile.

And look what happened next. This woman didn't miss a beat, did she? No sooner had Jesus said that his food was for God's children, not Gentile dogs, than she said that even the dogs get scraps that fall from the table. This proved her faith to Jesus, and a blessing did fall from the table. Jesus gave her and the disciples a preview of things to come for the Gentiles. Her daughter was healed.

But how did her words prove her faith? At the beginning of this sermon I mentioned how Peter's little faith last week compared with this woman's great faith this week. In Peter's case, his faith was strong enough that he believed Jesus could empower him to walk on water. But he did not continue to believe. Once he left the boat his faith weakened, he started to focus on the wind around him rather than Jesus, and started to sink.

The woman today did just the opposite. She recognized Jesus as Lord right away even though she probably never had seen him before. And when she encountered some resistance she, unlike Peter, persisted in trusting Jesus' power. She did not claim any of God's blessings for the Jews, nor did she suggest she was entitled to anything. She relied only upon Jesus' mercy and God's grace to give her a crumb from the table, and she had faith that a crumb would be enough.

### **IV.**

What does this story about faith mean for us today? In some ways faith has gotten a bad rap in modern times. Today many people in the secular world think of faith as a form of simple mindedness, a type of uncritical thinking that is beneath us as so-called sophisticated and educated people. And even among people who say they are believers, the meaning of faith sometimes is not fully understood.

But before we get into what faith is for us, it could be helpful to think about what faith is not. First, faith is not a way to take ideas that have no reality and make them real, or visa versa. Merely making ourselves believe or disbelief something through our own logic does not make it so or not so. The truth is the truth, and our belief or unbelief neither creates the truth nor suppresses it.

This can be a perilous trap for post-modern liberal theology, which seems to insist that truth is grounded in cultural and social relevance. In these circles faith and truth are constantly being revised to reflect the changing values and standards of society. For me, that is not faith. It is wishful thinking.

On a different part of the theological spectrum, faith also is not merely an emotion that overpowers the senses, and causes people to become wrapped up in an ecstatic response to the moment. Certainly the Holy Spirit can lead us in prayer and be present in worship, but the Spirit cannot just be summoned on demand.

And faith is not just a good guess based on our best estimates. It is not susceptible to scientific analysis or theories of probability. We cannot claim, for example, that we have faith merely because it is more likely than not that Scripture is true.

This points to a similar error. Faith is not an insurance policy. I have heard people say they did not know whether they believed in God, but the smarter move was to live as though God existed because if that turned out to be the case then they would have coverage. This is not faith, but for people who believe this way, there still is hope. Over the years I have seen people come to church for all the wrong reasons, and then become faithful Christians believers.

Finally, and this is important but difficult at times to accept, faith has nothing to do with our present circumstances. Our faith should not suffer if we experience hardship. We never were promised freedom from hardship, at least in this life. And if we are blessed we should not become presumptuous in assuming our faith is the reason when it simply could be God's grace.

In short, faith acts in our lives, just as it acted in the life of the Canaanite woman, by causing us to know and believe in existing realities for which we have no evidence, but which are no less real merely because they are beyond our ability to understand through our powers of reason.

This means that faith comes to us from above, as a gift, through God's grace. We can pray for it, but we cannot create or manufacture faith through our own efforts other than to respond in our humble acceptance of God's gift of salvation through Jesus Christ.

## V.

The Canaanite woman in today's Gospel had no reason to express faith that Jesus would help her daughter. In fact, she had good reasons not to do so. She was not Jewish, and as far as we know never had seen Jesus before that day. Yet she believed he would help, and she was content with a crumb from the table.

That is the power of faith. A crumb is sufficient. And if we step out in faith and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior our lives will change. The changes might surprise us. They might not be what we expect. They might not be what we ask in prayer. We might even think they are crumbs from the table. But they will be enough.

Martin Luther, the great sixteenth century reformer, described the life of faith in terms of a ship. He said that faith is not just believing that the ship exists, but it also means stepping onto that ship, and putting ourselves to sea, and entrusting ourselves to it.

God is that ship, the perfect ship. And he has given us the perfect gift in his Son, Jesus Christ. He calls us to step on board and accept that gift. As we do so we, like the Canaanite woman, experience the wonder of faith, and we are united in a relationship with Christ and his love. *Amen.*