

## ***The Power of Faith***

Mark 7:24-37

September 6, 2009

### **I.**

Today's gospel reading described two of Jesus' miracles. One, about healing the deaf man, was similar to most other miracles Jesus did. However, the story of the Syrophonecian woman is a little different, and so that's what I will talk about today.

And as background, I should mention that the term "Syrophonecia" refers to a geographical area north of Palestine that once was part of the ancient Phoenician empire, but that in New Testament times had been occupied by Syria. Today it is part of Lebanon.

This also meant that the area was enemy territory, so to speak, for Jesus. It was not the land of the Hebrews, but rather pagan Gentiles. And the reading makes clear that the woman who asked for Jesus help was a Gentile. This turns out to be a key factor in the story, which centers around the unexpected and surprising faith that this woman had.

And this biblical story of faith reminds me of a modern story of another woman's faith. Just before Christmas a woman was shopping at the mall. She had experienced a hard day, a chilly wind was blowing, and it was raining. She drove into an overcrowded parking lot and didn't see any open parking 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."

Well, 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? Our weary shopper 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, who seemingly knew nothing of Jesus or his message, but yet in her heart believed he would help. According to the standards of the world she should have had no hope, but according to God's standards her faith was all she needed.

### **II.**

So let's look at the context of the story more closely. We might begin by wondering why Jesus and the disciples were even in the lands of the Gentiles. This might seem unusual because during Jesus' lifetime he focused on teaching the Jews, not the Gentiles (Mt. 10:5-6). We know, of course, that Gentiles eventually were included in the salvation Jesus offered, but their hope became secure after his death, not during his life (Ro. 1:16, Gal. 3:28).

One of the reasons for that was the frequently repeated revelation that Jesus came to fulfill the law (Mt. 5:17, Lk. 24:44, Jo. 12:38, Ro. 10:4, Gal. 4:4-5), and the law in this case was the Hebrew law given to Moses and the Jewish people on Mt. Sinai.

And so Jesus had to come first as Messiah to the Jews. After all, what would Gentiles have thought if Jesus told them he came to fulfill the Hebrew law when that law did not even apply to them? It could have been a confusing and counterproductive message. Thus, God's plan of salvation meant that the Gentiles would wait for the resurrection as the revelation of their hope.

### III.

But yet, today's reading from Mark tells about what Jesus did to help a Gentile woman. She came to Jesus and said that her daughter was possessed by a demon, and she asked him to cast it out of her. In Matthew's version of the story Jesus replied that he "was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (15:24), and then in both versions he said "it is not fair to take the children's food and feed it to the dogs."

And, as frequently happens in the Bible, Jesus was speaking in metaphors. Children's food described God's blessings for the Jews, and his reference to dogs seems to be a dismissive and derogatory way of referring to Gentiles.

So, what about this? Was Jesus being politically incorrect? Was he being narrow-minded or arrogant? Theologians and scholars have differing opinions. Some say he was testing her faith, while others suggest he wanted to emphasize that he was about to do something unusual by healing a Gentile.

But it really doesn't make any difference because 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 the crumbs 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.

And she probably never had seen Jesus before. When he referred to her daughter as a dog she continued to trust his power. She asked only for a crumb from the table, and she had faith that a crumb would be enough. You might say that her dogged approach paid off.

### IV.

What does this story about faith mean for us now? 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 are believers, the meaning of faith can be understood in different ways.

But before we get into what faith is, it could be helpful to consider what faith is not. First, faith is not a way to take false ideas and make them true, or visa versa. Merely believing or disbelieving something through our own logic or wishful thinking does not necessarily make it so or not so. The truth is the truth, and our own 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 evidence of godly faith, but rather worldly agendas.

And there are some other things we know are not faith. Faith is not like a spare tire, only to be used in emergencies. Faith is not like a bus or train, only to be ridden when it goes our way. Faith is not a light switch, to be turned off and on.

This points to another error. Faith is not an insurance policy. Some people are not sure if they believe in God, but have decided the smarter move is to live as though God existed because they think they would have coverage if it turns out to be true. This is not faith, but there still is hope for people who take this approach. Over the years I have seen people come to church for all the wrong reasons, and then become devout Christians believers.

And this leads to a distinction between faith and hope. I can stand here today and look back on how the Saints have played during the preseason, and I can entertain a reasonable hope that they will be in the post-season playoffs. But I cannot yet have faith that their season will be successful. Hope can be part of faith, but it is not faith itself

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 assume that blessings are a *quid pro quo* for having faith when it simply could be God's grace.

So, having reviewed some misconceptions about what faith is not, let's consider what it is. The Book of Hebrews defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). In the Old Testament faith was the certainty of receiving what God had promised but not yet provided.

Faith acts in our lives, just as it acted in the life of the Gentile 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. It is the inner conviction of God's truth unencumbered by our own limited knowledge.

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 Gentile woman in today's Gospel had no logical reason to have faith that Jesus would help her daughter. In fact, she had good reasons not to do so. Yet she believed he would help, and she was content with a crumb from the table.

That is the power of faith. When we step out in faith and accept Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior and live according to his teachings our lives change. And the changes might surprise us. They might not be what we expect. They might not be what we ask in prayer. But faith, by definition, is not something we cannot explain in human terms. If we could, it would not be faith.

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.

The church is an example of that ship. It is a visible symbol of our faith. And when I say church I do not mean those parts of organized religion or commercial Christianity that give the church a bad name. I mean the church as Jesus intended it to be, a group of people who truly worship together, who care for and support each other, and who help and serve others in the community.

I believe that is our ideal here at St. Thomas. Because we are human we will fall short of perfection, but we try and we do so in faith. And when we try, we will find that our faith always will save us, and at times it is all we have and all we need. It is the way to live and experience the more abundant life that God wants for us. *Amen.*