

Lectionary 20 A
A Woman with a Great Faith

August 20, 2023
Matthew 15:10-28

Last week we heard about Peter, the Rock, sinking in water. Jesus tells him, “You of little faith. Why did you doubt?”

This week we hear Jesus tell a woman; she is not named, “Woman, great is your faith.” The irony is: She shouldn’t be a woman with any faith.

We are told that she’s from the region of Tyre and Sidon. These cities are Phoenician cities. They are not part of Israel. Since it says, “from the region,” rather than name her city, she was likely a country girl without the benefits that living in a city might give her.

Our text says that she’s a Canaanite. Animosity between Jews and Canaanites goes back to the time of Noah. Genesis 9 tells us that Canaanites were cursed to be the slaves of the descendants of Shem¹— from which we get the word “Semites.” Jews are descendants of Shem. Canaanites were to be their slaves. That didn’t make them the best of friends.

In addition to this curse, after Moses led the Hebrews out of Egypt, Joshua led them into the Promised Land. In order to settle in this new land, they either killed or drove off all the people who were living there. Many of the people they destroyed and forced off the land were Canaanites. That didn’t make them the best of friends.

In addition to all this, it was not proper for a woman to talk to man in public. The Gospel of John tells the story of Jesus talking with a woman by the well. It also says: “Just then his disciples came. They were *astonished* that he was speaking with a woman.”²

This woman will not let being of the wrong race, the wrong religion, the wrong gender keep her from crying out to Jesus. Her confidence that this Jewish man, this Son of David, was able to help her daughter was so great that none of those barriers would stop her from crying out to him – shrieking could be another way the word is translated. She was being a bit of a nuisance – a loud nuisance.

Two weeks ago the disciples had a solution for the hungry crowd: send them away. This week they tell Jesus the same thing: send her away. (Should people started shrieking in the middle of a service, I would probably want the ushers to send them away, too. It’s bad enough when a cell phone goes off. We won’t send you away.)

Jesus ignores her at first. (That’s usually what I’ve done when a cell phone goes off during worship.)

When he speaks, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Israelis are God’s special people. That’s what God promised Abraham centuries before. This woman was just a common pagan.

However, the Greek text doesn’t have the word “only.” It is phrased somewhat differently than our translation. “I was not sent, except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” His objective are the lost sheep of the house of Israel, but who are they? More about that later.

I watch some recovery videos on You Tube. Last Friday, a guy was called to pull out a van that was stuck in the mud. On their way, they found another vehicle stuck in the mud. They stopped and pulled them out, even though they weren’t their objective. They got to their

¹ Genesis 9:25-27

² John 4:27

objective a little later and pulled them out.

The call to help the one doesn't exclude helping others on the way. Maybe Jesus will stop and help this common, pagan woman on his way to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.

Who are the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I said that I'd get back to this. One answer is: the sheep are the descendants of Abraham. This woman is not one of them. She is Canaanite, not Jewish.

Another answer comes from a statement Paul makes in Galatians: "Just as Abraham 'believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness,' so you see, **those who believe are the descendants of Abraham.**"³ If everyone who believes is considered a descendant of Abraham, this woman might qualify. Her belief in Jesus makes her one of the sheep.

She kneels before him – a posture of worship. She calls him, "Lord," and "Son of David." She must have heard something about him – and believed it. She understands how special Jesus is. She believed it so strongly that she risked approaching him against all the social barriers in place at the time – and cries out to him.

Jesus says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Back then, like today, calling someone a "dog" or "son of a dog" is not a complement.

She turns this critique around. She wishes that she were like a dog, because dogs get the crumbs that fall from the children's table – even if they aren't thrown to them. If Jesus gives her nothing, he is treating her worse than a dog. Dogs get crumbs. She would get nothing.

A Greek word that you know, but you might not know that you know, is *kyrie*. That is the Greek word for "Lord." In the Greek, when she first cries out, "Have mercy on me, Lord," she uses the words, *kyrie eleison*. You heard those words earlier this morning.

I bring this up, because this word is used twice in her response to Jesus. She says, "Yes, **Lord.**" She agrees with him about throwing the children's food to dogs. She goes on, "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." The word for "masters'" is also *kyrios*. That's another way the word can be translated. Will Jesus let some crumbs come her way, or be worse than other lords whose dogs get crumbs? Will Jesus let some crumbs come her way, or treat her worse than a dog?

Not only does Jesus heal her daughter, he tells her, "Great is your faith." There is no one else in the Bible who is described as having a great faith.

What I see in this woman that makes her faith so great? 1. Her persistence in crying out to Jesus in spite of all the racial, religious, cultural, and gender differences between her and Jesus. She will not let anything keep her from Jesus – not even Jesus' early rebuff of her request. 2. Her recognition of the greatness of Jesus. He is Lord. He can help. 3. Her unworthiness. She is willing to be no more than a dog, if that will get her crumbs for her daughter. 4. Her concern for her daughter. She is not seeking anything for herself, like the ability to walk on water, like Peter did; but out of love and concern and compassion for her daughter, she will be persistent – even challenging Jesus, perhaps embarrassing him if he would do nothing.

This foreign woman, becomes someone very special in the gospels. She is special because of the words of Jesus. "Great is your faith." She has become one of the found sheep of the house of Israel. By faith, she has become an offspring of Abraham.

We, like her, are children of Abraham because of the faith God has given us. Even if it's

³ Galatians 3:6-7

only a little faith like Peter had; it's enough. He was saved by Jesus. You are God's special people. God said so at your baptisms. Jesus invites you, his friends, to this very special meal – even more special than a birthday cake. Jesus gives us himself. He tells you again: You are no longer just ordinary, common people. You are the forgiven children of God. You have been filled with the Holy Spirit. You've eaten the miracle bread and wine of Jesus. Don't think of yourselves or act like you're just ordinary folks. You are the children of God. God said so. Believe it.