

“WOMAN, GREAT IS YOUR FAITH!”

Matthew 15:21-28

Verse 21 - "Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon." Jesus leaves the shores of the Sea of Galilee and travels to a region that is considered to be unclean in Jewish eyes. Jesus walks north to what today is Lebanon and is still outside the established boundaries of Israel and still considered an area rife with pagans and other suspect characters. Little has changed in 2,000 years in the Middle East.

Yet Jesus walks boldly into it, and it doesn't take long for one of the locals to discover his presence and start making a scene.

Verse 22 - "Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

Matthew makes sure we know she is a "Canaanite" woman and that her ancestors date back to before Moses and Joshua came to the Promised Land. As such, she is a long time pagan and enemy of the Jewish faith.

This Canaanite woman totally ignores all of that history and defiantly approaches Jesus and his disciples. Not only is she a Canaanite woman but she has a daughter possessed by a demon. In an age in which most people believed that all diseases - but especially demonic possession - resulted from past sinfulness, this woman's character rating slips even further. What has she done in her life to have earned such a curse on her daughter?

Even though she has a terrible reputation, this woman says the right words. She immediately addresses Jesus as "Lord", the title given Jesus by all true believers in Matthew's gospel. She further addresses Jesus as the "Son of David", a title used in Matthew's gospel by the riff-raff, the poor and

the diseased that are able to see in Jesus the Messiah of Israel. This woman is an outsider who wants to be an insider.

Verse 23 - "But Jesus did not answer her at all." Why? This woman confesses her faith and Jesus gives her the silent treatment. Was he so taken aback by her bold confession that he couldn't decide how to respond? Was he trying to ignore her, hoping she'd go away? Was he using his silence to get her to say more?

Apparently the woman continues her pleading because after awhile the disciples have had enough of her noise. Verse 23 - "And his disciples came and urged him saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." Get rid of her! The disciples are not motivated by love or compassion for this woman and her child. They are interested in convenience and getting rid of her annoying presence.

In verse 24, Jesus responds to his disciples and not to the woman, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus' words sound cold and callous but they are theologically correct. According to Old Testament prophecy, the Messiah must first come to Israel so that the Jews could then witness to the rest of the world.

Perhaps the woman was encouraged that at least Jesus said something and in some small way acknowledged her presence. She is very worshipful and respectful when she comes and kneels before Jesus, saying, "Lord, help me."

But again she is rebuffed by Jesus with his harshest words yet. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

As the "children of God", Israel is to be fed first. Jewish tradition was not to take the spiritual nourishment meant for the Jews and toss it to the Gentiles.

The woman wisely chooses not to argue with Jesus and his Jewish tradition. Instead of disputing her status as second in line, she humbly acknowledges her position. But using her wit and sense of humor along with her sincere humility and faithfulness, the woman refutes Jesus' excuse and finds for him a reason to grant her the healing she requests for her daughter.

Verse 27 - She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."

Jesus gives her credit for thinking outside the box. "Good answer, woman!" Jesus seems to be thinking. Jesus is impressed and inspired by this woman's tenacity and vision. The banquet table of God is not set just for the children of Israel but will be stretched to accommodate all people of faith.

The Canaanite woman doesn't have much but she does have the one qualification needed for admission to the table - faithfulness.

"Woman, great is your faith!" - exclamation point - Jesus announces in front of his disciples. In so doing, Jesus disses his disciples a little bit, since Jesus had just rebuked Peter for having such "little faith" when Peter got out of the boat and began to sink.

Because this woman's faith is so great, he will now give her the healing she desires. "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

So are we more like the disciples or are we more like the Canaanite woman in our relationship with Jesus? When someone on the outside tries to come inside, do we ignore them, turn our backs on them, and hope they'll go away?

In our text, the disciples see themselves as the chosen few, the cream of the crop, the entitled elite, the devoted dozen, and the Lord's own dream team. They are passionate about

Christ and don't have much interest in sharing their mentor with the unenlightened masses.

When Jesus is silent at the beginning of our text, the disciples assume he is blowing her off and try to help him out by saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." We do not want to let her in. She is not one of us. She is an outsider.

It is never easy to do something outside the box. It's not easy to shed the "this-is-the-way-it's-always-been-done" mentality. It is easy to cherish the enthusiasm we have for our traditions, our patterns, rituals and programs.

When I worshipped in my previous congregation in Nebraska this summer, one of the topics of conversations was whether or not to purchase what they refer to as the "new hymnal." Changing hymnals once every 25 years can be very traumatic for congregations who get set in their ways. I tried to comfort them by telling our story of having switched four years ago and no heart attacks resulted. I told them of the much larger selection of hymns all 150 Psalms are there instead of selected Psalms, 10 settings including the three old worship settings from the green hymnal, a healing service, the catechism in the back, etc. I assured them they would survive the change of hymnals, and more importantly, their worship experience could benefit from the change.

Many of us, including myself, are very slowly adjusting to incorporating technology into our worship and congregational life. At our spring congregational meeting, we voted to do work that has to be done. A new roof, wall repairs, new furnaces, and \$15,000 to update our web site, face book, etc. I know from our membership classes that more people find Divinity on the internet and visit on their own than those who visit because we invite them. I know that evangelism and sharing the good news of Jesus Christ is greatly enhanced by our web site, by our face book, by having a sanctuary computer to do things never done before. Pastor Don has commented to me many times about how much

ministry has changed and how he appreciates what we do on the screen during worship. Many church historians believe we are in the midst of a new reformation and only the churches who are willing to reform will survive.

No matter how we do it, whether it is on our web site or right here during our worship time together, the challenge is to curb and even sometimes break those patterns or traditions that keep people away from the saving grace of the Lord. Unfortunately, whenever we talk about making changes in the church, we get accused of taking good spiritual food and throwing it to the dogs.

Like Jesus, we have to be willing to curb our enthusiasm for time-honored traditions if we're going to reach a younger generation that knows little or nothing of our practices and traditions. We can't afford to come across like the first disciples, insiders who were certainly excited about their faith, but also cranky and basically uninterested in sharing their discoveries with the outsiders around them. It's important to be willing to bend and even break our patterns as we seek to improve how we communicate with one another and with those on the outside. After all, didn't Jesus learn a little something from the Canaanite woman, when she expanded his awareness of what even the dogs under the table needed to eat?

Equally important, we are challenged to see the faith in our neighbors, no matter who they are. True believers are not only found in "inside" groups of 12 disciples who are convinced that they have a corner on spirituality. Sincere faith is found among Canaanite women, recovering drug addicts or alcoholics working the 12 steps, twenty-something's who have never darkened a church door, and those of us at midlife, and older, who are wondering about the meaning of it all. As a church, we miss an important connection point if we fail to see the presence of faith in these lives as a potential foundation for a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Just like our Lord, we have to find fresh ways to welcome people who feel like outsiders. Inviting them in to one of our many ministry groups would be one way to welcome them, share our traditions and faith with them, and gracefully turn them into insiders.

When we gather together in our ministry groups already in place; women's circles, A. A., Via de Cristo groups, our various committees, Sunday School teachers, Stephens ministers, Parish nurses, Redeemer Crisis Center, let's ask ourselves what we can do now to invite new people in, outsiders inside, so that more and more we can join with Jesus in saying to a new acquaintance: "Woman, great is your faith!"