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Matthew 15:21-28
All you need is ... Faith!

I have been thinking a lot about faith this summer. That's partly because of the sermon series on faith Kirby and I have been preaching on this summer. But this week, it was because I had a LOT of time to think in the car alone. Driving from here to Louisville, then Purdue and back home to get Josh moved in and settled for school, gave me all sorts of time to think about faith.

The story you heard this morning from the gospel of Matthew - the story of the Canaanite woman with the tormented daughter - is a faith story that can be rather confusing. At first, it seems like it will be a "straightforward" - yet miraculous - healing story, meant to show the healing power of Jesus. A woman approaches Jesus and asks for her daughter to be healed. We know that Jesus is able to heal those who are sick. We know that Jesus has compassion for those who are suffering. The Jesus that we know and love as our Lord and Savior is a Jesus who will heal this woman's child without any hesitation, without any questions. Right?

Well, unfortunately, it's not as simple as that. Yes, in the end, the young girl is healed, but first we are confronted with some details which are for us - confusing.

The story begins with Jesus traveling north, away from Jerusalem, into Gentile or non-Jewish regions. Here, Jesus and his disciples are confronted by a woman. The text reads, "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.'"

Who was this woman? What do we know about her? She was not Jewish. By culture and language this woman was Greek. By religion she was a pagan. By position in her community, she was a nobody. She had a daughter plagued by demons, and for all of these reasons, she was a person to be avoided - an outcast.

Jews did not mix with gentiles - gentiles were seen to be unclean. Men did not mix with women, for women, at that time in history, were considered unclean. And healthy people did not mix with those who had a family member who was cursed with some demonic affliction, for they too were thought to be unclean. This woman who was shouting for help was to be avoided at all costs. Jesus and his disciples, as all devout Jews of their day, would be thinking; Stay away! Don't come near us! Don't touch us! You are unclean!

So what is Jesus' response to this woman in need? We read, "He did not answer her at all." He said nothing. He was silent. He walked by without so much as a word. Jesus followed the rules of Jewish law and totally avoided this woman. How do we feel about Jesus responding in this way? I know that I feel confused and angry. Jesus is supposed to be the example to be followed, but he completely ignores this distressed woman.

It's hard for us, as 20th century Christians, to comprehend the strict set of rules followed by Jews in the days of Jesus. When I was in the Holy Land last year, I shared an incident that occurred in the marketplace during my first trip to Israel. We were in Jerusalem, and I watched in pure amazement as an Orthodox Jewish man passed by my group, with his eyes closed. After several near misses, he ran straight into a stone wall,

and then, slightly dazed, he turned and went on his way – his eyes still closed. Abraham, our Jewish guide, explained that foreigners and women were still to be avoided and literally “not seen” - even at the cost of running into stone walls.

In that Jerusalem marketplace, I was unable to respond, but the Canaanite woman in our story does not give up. She doesn't let Jesus simply ignore her and pass her by, with his eyes "closed" to her. She believes that this man in her midst is indeed the Lord - the Son of David, the Messiah promised to the Jewish people. She has heard how he healed the dumb, and the blind, and those with evil spirits of all kinds. She knows that Jesus is her only hope. This woman believes that Jesus, the Messiah, can heal her tormented daughter. It is the strength of a mother's love for her child which gives her the courage to continue asking for help. And it is the depth of her faith in Jesus as Lord that assures her that in the end, Jesus can and will help her.

But the woman's persistence becomes a nuisance to the disciples. They urge Jesus to do something about this woman. "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." They want nothing to do with her - she is a foreigner, she is a woman, she has a daughter tormented by demons - thus unclean, and a risk to their purity.

What is Jesus' response to the disciples request to send the woman away? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He does not send her away, but with his words he declares that she is none of his concern because she's not Jewish. It's as if he's saying, "It's not my job, It's not my problem!"

I don't know about you, but now I'm really upset! Here is a woman in need, first being ignored, and now being told she's not worthy of help. How are we to make sense of this response of Jesus? The first thing we must realize is that Jesus, as the Messiah, was promised and sent to save the Jewish people - the people of God - the sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah. The common understanding of that time is that only the Jews were to be saved - no one else. No foreigners, no gentiles, and certainly no "unclean" people. In other words, not people like US! Anything other than this belief was radical and beyond the imagination of the disciples and all devout Jews who had been waiting for their Messiah. Now that he was there with them, they were not about to share him. Jesus understood this and realized that he needed to be sensitive to this way of believing.

And yet Jesus also knew that God's love is big enough to go beyond human boundaries, and God's saving grace is offered to all who truly believe. He would have known this from the Hebrew scriptures. The prophet Isaiah spoke of foreigners who would come to love the Lord, that the Lord's house would be called a house of prayer for all people, and that God would gather others besides those already gathered. Christ, the Messiah, was promised to the Jews, but God's desire is for all to believe, that all people may come to know and love Jesus Christ as Lord. No one is excluded.

And the woman "came and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" She had still not given up. Her faith was strong and her need was great. Jesus answered her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What do his words, which sound so harsh to us, really mean? The children represent the Jews - and the dogs the gentiles. So Jesus is saying to the woman that she and her daughter are not deserving of his healing grace because they are not Jewish. He has been sent to the Jews - as promised. But this woman, humbled and kneeling on the ground, knowing that she sits at the feet of the Son of God, has the faith and courage to respond. "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She is willing to take 2nd place, to give the place of honor to the Jews. But this woman correctly believes that God's grace is abundant enough to care for all, whatever place or position they might be in, whether Jew or

gentile, whether clean or unclean.

Jesus sees before him a woman of strength and courage, a woman who has suffered in raising a daughter tormented by a demon, a woman who truly believes and is willing to fight for what she believes from upon her knees. Each time she spoke to Jesus, she called him Lord. This is a woman of great faith and he can no longer ignore her request. In the end, it is this woman's faith which brings healing to her daughter. Her faith in Jesus as Christ. Her faith in Jesus' power to heal. Her faith that God's grace is abundant and available to all. Her faith that goes against the label of "unclean" that society has given her. And her faith that Jesus will cross over every barrier in response to the truth which she professes.

It is this woman's strong and humble faith to which Jesus responds. For this really is a story about this woman's faith, not about Jesus' ability to heal. This woman knew pain for her daughter that she loved. She asked for help. She shouted for help. She cried for help. She begged for help. And through her example of persistent faith, there are three messages for us:

1 – we are reminded that the miraculous power of God is available to us through faith

2 - we are shown that God's grace is available to all those who believe

3 - and we realize there may be times when our faith brings us before our Lord, humbled upon our knees, fighting for what we know is right.

May your faith in our merciful God be strengthened by the faith of this Canaanite woman.