

Faith Of an Outsider

(A faith that wouldn't Give Up)

Texts: Genesis 45:1-15

Romans 11:1-2, 29-32 (Series A, 8th Sunday after Pentecost) Ps. 133

Matthew 15: (10- 20) 21-28

Let us pray:

Civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. in his famous letter from Birmingham Jail responded to criticisms of the local clergy who charged that he was an outside agitator who was stirring up trouble away from his home town.

He wrote: *I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."*

The gospel story today features a woman - a Canaanite woman - who persists in asking Jesus for a healing for her daughter. According to the thought at the time - this woman was beyond the pale.

- She was a foreigner
- An outsider
- One who did not belong.

The woman from Canaan (today Lebanon) is the first non-Jewish woman that Jesus deals with in the gospels and - as the story seems to show - there seems to be some reluctance on his part to do so.

But on the other hand, the scriptures are full of passages saying how salvation will proceed from the Jews to the Gentiles - *"I say to you many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven..."* (Matthew 8:11)

Jesus starts his work with his own people, sending his disciples out to perform miracles and proclaim the nearness of the Kingdom of Heaven - but it is clear from the beginning that Jesus had no intention of confining the good news to the Children of Israel alone.

I believe that Jesus was trying to make a point about *faith* - and about the barriers that people place in the way of salvation - barriers of *race*, barriers of *culture*, barriers of *gender*, barriers of *wealth*, even barriers of *morality* and *religion*.

As it says in Isaiah, – *Is not the House of the Lord of Israel, the House of God, to be called a House of Prayer for All Nations?* That is the way it supposed to be. Today's passage does show us that barriers do exist between people, and that those barriers can be overcome.

I want us to look at the story from this vantage point and how it speaks to us about the faith that overcomes barriers. There are many kinds of barriers that seek to keep the woman from Jesus and the salvation, wholeness, and healing that she seeks.

The most obvious barrier is that fact of her nationality. She is not a Jew. She has no business turning to a Jewish religious leader for help. She does not worship the Jewish God or follow the Jewish religious customs and laws. She, as I said earlier, does not belong.

The second barrier is her gender. She is a woman - and traditionally this woman really had no business approaching a male religious leader uninvited. These barriers are bad enough - but others are revealed in the story that are equally devastating. (*Catholic Priest & Communion*).

After the woman decides to approach Jesus, after she sees him and calls upon him to heal her daughter, she must deal with his silence. She must overcome the natural reaction that surely welled up within her to simply give up and go away. The master is not responding to her.

Then - on top of this - when she persists in crying out, she must deal with the disciples, who try to drive her away. She must overcome the scorn, the frustration, and dislike of those around her - those who seem to have been told by the master that he has no responsibility towards outsiders like her.

Think of it - think of having a real need in your life, and believing that there is someone who can help you with that need, but that person is totally unrelated to you by blood, culture, religion, or race - and in fact comes from a bloodline, culture, religion and race that is opposed to your own.

Think of having not only to face this kind of barrier, but also having to face a group of people who are telling you to get lost, and at the same time having to deal with apparent apathy, and hostility from the person whom you are seeking help from, -- and all because of who you are and where you have come from.

But the woman from Lebanon (Canaan) persists despite the barriers between her and Jesus; she continues on despite the obstacles between her and what she believes is will be the source of her daughter's healing - the one whom she calls "*Lord*" and "*The Son of David*" - the one she believes is the Messiah of the Jews.

She wails and cries out for help, she does not get angry and she does not give up. She believes that Jesus can help her and she is persistent and she is humble in her belief, she is clever and she is hopeful in her faith, and in the end she achieves the goal she battled all the barriers to obtain, she receives the life of her daughter.

And that is what the story is really all about it is about overcoming the barriers that prevent others, and ourselves, from being made whole. Every person of good sense knows that wholeness comes from God and can only come from God.

While this woman from Lebanon (Canaan) did not know God in the way that those in Israel knew him, she believed that Jesus was special, and believes in him. And she takes action on the basis of that belief.

She holds onto her faith in the face of tenacity,

- she holds onto her faith even though she does not hear an answer from the Lord right away,
- she holds onto her faith despite the barriers raised by others,

- she holds onto her faith even in the face of apparent insult and rejection from the one she believes in,

And in the end, she receives the reward of faith - salvation comes into her home.

What I want to say at this point is that, it is very important to distinguish *faith* from other kinds of things. When Jesus says to her at the end of the story

- "Woman, great is your faith"

What he means is not - great is your persistence

- nor even - great is your need

No, what he means is great is the reason you have for being here when your daughter is sick - great is the hope you have in coming to me - great is the trust that led you here and caused you to be persistent.

You see we often confuse faith - the faith that overcomes barriers – with action. And while faith most surely does lead to action, faith itself must be in the forefront to make those actions happen.

We need to remember our faith if we are to overcome barriers and receive wholeness. We need to really believe the word written in This Book, and the word that is written on our hearts - that word that says God is not just the God of Israel, - and God is not just limited to making some people feel good about themselves on a Sabbath evening or a Sunday morning.

We need to believe that God cares even when it seems God doesn't care. We need to believe that God is life, and love and goodness. And that life is stronger than the mightiest enemy.

The Word is stronger than death, and that love is greater than the highest wall of prejudice or the most solid barrier of ignorance. And that goodness is meant for all.

We need to believe that God is the source of all healing and that he is the fount all of grace that he gives to those in need and listens to those who humble themselves before him and believe in him.

My friends - no human barrier can stand before God or before those who call on his name in faith. When we have faith - when we turn to God as our hope and our life that which we seek we will find. The answer we seek may not come instantly. And the forces of human prejudice and ignorance may try to drive us away.

As we live out our faith through trials and testing, our faith grows into the "Great Faith" which Jesus commends – a Great Faith which invites us to come to him; empowers us to seek him every day, in every situation; and enables us to trust Him completely.

We may even think at times that we hear God telling us we are outsiders - though we would be hearing wrong - But if we hold onto our faith, if we persist in it God will help us.

May God graciously grant us that kind of faith – "A Faith that Won't Give Up!" – a faith that trusts our Saviour, won't let go of His promises, and carries us safely through this world and eventually into the arms of your loving, waiting Savior in the world to come!

This is the message of the story of the (Lebanese) Canaanite woman, "*faith of an outsider*". A Faith that Won't Give Up!" This is the gospel of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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