

April 21, 2024

Lesson 8: A Gentile Woman's Great Faith

Scripture: Matthew 15: 21-28

Context:

Today we continue our spring curriculum, "Encounters in Prayer and Love," where we look at how the spiritual discipline of prayer illuminates God's presence in our lives. Today we continue our unit titled "Empowering Spirit," as we examine how Jesus and the Holy Spirit led people to focus on spreading the gospel to languages where others could understand the gift of faith and grace. Today's lesson will focus on how to affirm how great faith can be shown by worshipful struggling with God.

The scripture lesson for today comes from the gospel of Matthew. Of all passages in the gospel, this is perhaps one of the most confusing and distressing in Christian circles. Jesus, usually presented as compassionate and caring, comes across as unduly harsh and insensitive as he deals with a mother who longs to take care of her child.¹ There are several ways to read the narrative ranging from treating it as inauthentic, to contending it is authentic yet arguing Jesus' behavior is not as harsh as modern reader thinks, to accepting the story as it stands in all its harshness.² Yet the reality is all interpretations are conjectural and lack the supporting evidence to place in one camp.³ Perhaps each contains an element of truth though as God takes the narrative to reach different people and invite them to think on how God constantly surprises us.

An important note for all gospels is how Jesus' mission transcends different borders. The reader is alerted to how something is up when Jesus "withdraws" into the Gentile territory of Sidon and Tyre. As such, Jesus is going to deal with those who are not Jewish and are Gentiles. As Matthew and the other gospel writers are addressing churches with a growing Gentile membership, there need to be presentations of Jesus interacting and including Gentiles in his ministry.⁴ All gospels contain Jesus interacting with Gentiles, and the biggest point is how he is not afraid to engage with them even at the chagrin of others.

Another significant point of the story is the placement in the gospel narrative. Matthew places the event with the Gentile woman after a dispute about food and purity laws suggesting Jesus is pushing the law-free mission to the Gentiles.⁵ Regardless of how Jesus addresses her, there is still an exchange in which he doesn't fully ignore her. He meets her based on her plea and is moved by her faith. Her example poises a contrast to others who want Jesus to prove his identity with feats and political leadership. God shows the gift of faith and the gift of grace to even the most unsuspecting of subjects.

¹ Williamson, Lamar. Jr. "Mark." *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009.), 176.

² *Ibid.*, 176-177.

³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 178.

⁵ *Ibid.*

Application

Of all the texts difficult to preach and teach, this one would probably rise to the top. It is a lot easier and, in some ways, more life-giving to preach on the good news of Jesus from other accounts of his life. There's the Markan Jesus who is always on the go, healing and teaching people. There the Matthean Jesus who is the best and most polished teacher you've ever heard. Luke's Jesus is all about equality and the inclusivity of his kingdom. And the Jesus in John is bold, secure, and his mission is made known as he saves the world with assurance of his own identity. And then we come to the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman and eyes widen at what we read there.

Yet taking a step back we see how this is what God does throughout scripture. God always turns our heads and gives us an opportunity to be both encouraged and emboldened in our faith. The same goes for the plea of the Canaanite woman as she seeks aid for her child. God shows us how faith is a gift, not given just to the crème da la crème of society; faith is given to all even those who might be different and to those who come out of a place of reverence and awe.

In this case, the woman recognizes Jesus and how he is the one who everyone is talking about. She comes to him with the belief he can heal her daughter. Even when his response is not the idyllic response of what we think Jesus would usually give, she persists, and Jesus is moved by her faith. He now has a response to provide to all of his critics, particularly those who have everything figured out.

When I read this scripture passage again, I was taken back to numerous times in my life where I have been surprised by people who have expressed a faith in the Lord. There was a public figure who recently opened up about their walk with God and I remember the shock from many people who had never considered this person to be a believer. Until their book was published, most people never even knew they had faith.

Yet perhaps it is a lesson to all of us, particularly to those of us engaged actively in a community of faith, to consider how the Holy Spirit mysteriously works through different people when it comes to belief and faith. Often, we are good at developing important metrics about how people grow in their relationship which are indeed fruitful. We think about and watch how many times we attend church, how much do we give of our resources and spiritual gifts, how many spiritual growth opportunities do we offer, and numerous other measuring devices. The greatest gift though can come in the faith we have in our Lord and sometimes it comes in the strangest places.

One of the things I love about traveling is meeting people from different places and hearing what they think about religion and faith in general. Usually, I cannot tell as much until they ask what I do for a living. And then, just like that, Pandora's Box is opened when I tell them I am a clergy person. Yet nearly ninety-five percent of the time, I hear amazing stories about what the Lord has done in other's lives. And even if some are struggling with the idea of faith, they offer me great questions and thoughts about what informs my own. I revisit something they said a little bit later and the Holy Spirit convicts me to open my mind a little bit more to what God can and will do.

Today's Jesus doesn't have to make us uncomfortable or worried if we read the text in a certain light. What we are offered is God taking on the gift of faith and showcasing to the world how all are welcome to wrestle with questions of faith and identity. And God will be the one to sort those who worshipfully struggle and give them the gift of faith as they search. Perhaps sometimes it is someone not unlike us. Other times, we may be the ones coming to beg God for

crumbs from the table of the Lord. God meets humanity wherever we might be and gives us the gift of faith.

Have you had a crisis of faith; how did Jesus meet you in it? Why do you think Jesus went to a place where there were outsiders? What does this tell us about the people we judge, or we think we know about with their faith journey? Who has helped challenge you in your faith? How has the gift of faith sustained you in life?

Rev. Dr. E. Hunter Pugh
Pastor of Brantley – Brunson Chapel Charge
PO Box 71
Brantley, AL 36009