

Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

²³ *Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”*

²⁴ *He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.”*

²⁵ *The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said.*

²⁶ *He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”*

²⁷ *“Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”*

²⁸ *Then Jesus answered, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour. (Matthew 15:21-28)*

A Great Faith is a Humble Faith

Are you a hero of faith? I first read that expression when I was a student in a Lutheran elementary school like the one we operate here at Peace. I remember it struck me as an odd thing to say. A hero is a great man or woman. A hero is someone who does something dramatic, something that lesser people couldn’t do. Faith seemed to me to be the opposite of heroic. By definition, faith is humble. It’s quiet. It doesn’t call attention to itself. Yet, there is such a thing as a heroic faith. We see a faith like that this morning in our gospel lesson, a faith that Jesus himself calls “great.” Yet, what was that faith like? What quality made it heroic? **A great faith is a humble faith.**

I.

A humble faith recognizes where the real power lies. It isn’t with me. As much as I like to think of myself as smart and resourceful, as much as we like to believe that we take care of our families and our responsibilities, a humble faith recognizes an uncomfortable truth about ourselves. **A great faith is a humble faith. It recognizes the only one who can help us.**

That, of course, is Jesus. Consider the woman who came to Jesus looking for help in the gospel lesson this morning. She had a serious problem. Her daughter was demon possessed. It’s hard for us to imagine what that would be like. But it has to be horrible. A demon takes control of your body. That would be bad enough, but many times in the Bible, demons hurt that body. We hear of demons throwing the body into fires or bodies of water and of demon possessed people cutting themselves. Maybe the only thing worse than experiencing that personally, would be watching someone you love go through it. This woman came to Jesus hoping he could rescue her daughter from that horror.

But there was a complication: she was not Jewish. Jesus was Jewish and he spent almost his entire ministry preaching to Jewish people. God had been promising for more than 1500 years that a Savior would come to the Jewish people and Jesus was the fulfillment of that promise, so almost all of his work was directed at them. Now a couple of times, Jesus did leave Israel. This was one of those times. He was in what we today call Lebanon. But that’s just over the border and without a doubt there were many Jewish people living there. Jesus was probably working with them primarily. But this woman, this foreigner, came to him, the famous Jewish prophet looking for a solution to the crisis in her family.

Why did she do that? All that we know is what she said to Jesus: **“Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!”** “Lord” is the New Testament equivalent of God’s Old Testament name, which traditionally is rendered as “Jehovah.” But “Lord” can also just be a title of respect. Far more revealing is the other thing she called him: “Son of David.” That shows that this woman understood the Old Testament promises about the coming Savior. In 2nd Samuel, God promised to send a descendant of David who would rule over Israel forever. The Old Testament prophets repeated that promise again and again. At the time of Jesus, the Son of David was a title for the Savior – that’s why the people sang, “Hosanna to the Son of David!” on Palm Sunday. Whoever this woman was, she knew and believed the Old Testament promises about the coming Savior. And because she recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of those promises, she came to him for help.

But a faith like hers has to be humble. To come to Jesus, this woman had to recognize that she could not give her daughter what she needed. Her problem was just too big. In that, she's a wonderful model for us modern, self-reliant Christians. Could we ever have trouble asking Jesus for help? It seems to me that it's too easy today to turn to someone and to forget about God or leave him to the last resort. We all trust God to get us to heaven. But do we trust him to take care of our problems down here? When you're worried about some situation, how much time do you spend praying and how much time do you spend scheming to try and solve the problem?

When you're sick, do you trust God first or do you trust your doctor first? I'm not saying you shouldn't trust your doctor. Why would you go to a doctor that you didn't trust? God does expect us to use the minds he's given us to make the best use of doctors and the medical technology that he's given to us. But we must understand that behind all that medical science, God is working. All the efforts and procedures of all the doctors and nurses we ever see, will only have the effect on our lives that God wants it to have. In the end, doctors rely on probability and experience. Every human body is so unique that they cannot guarantee much of anything. They go with what usually works. But God can guarantee. God knows exactly what is best for you.

Do we trust God or do we put our doctors in God's place? Do we trust God to take care of our old age, or do we put our pension plans and our retirement benefits and our savings in God's place? Do we trust God to care for our children, to solve their problems and even to send challenges when that's what they need or do we trust in child psychology and what we read on the internet and the advice of people we know? Do we put teachers and counselors and even ourselves in God's place?

Why is it hard for us to trust God first? The sinful pride of the human heart wants to believe that I've got all this under control. And my friends, there's no culture more in tune with the sinful pride of our hearts than middle class American culture. In the end, that pride leads us to worship idols: our doctors, our pension plans, ourselves. Are we humble enough to trust God first? Don't we have to admit that we struggle to be humble? Don't we have to admit that all too often, asking God for help and placing our problems in his hands and walking away confident that he will do what's best is something that only comes last in our crises and then only when God takes away all the other options?

That pride is sin. If God treated us like our sin deserves, he'd just say, "Fine. Have it your way. Let all those other things take care of you and I won't lift a finger to help you." We'd find out pretty quickly how much we need his help, as one disaster after another piled up in our lives. We'd find out how lost we'd be in this life. And then we'd spend eternity in hell regretting our pride and sin.

But God does not treat us that way. Instead, day after day, he invites us to lay all our problems on Jesus. He points to Jesus as the Savior who took away the hell and the punishment that our pride deserves. Of all the people who ever lived, only Jesus had a perfect trust in God the Father. That perfect trust counts for us. God sees that instead of all our failures to trust him. Jesus took his perfect life and he offered on the cross to pay for our pride and sin. He died for all the times and all the ways that we put something or someone else in God's place. He died for our sinful hearts that don't want to trust in God. He suffered all the punishment we deserve and then he rose and declared that we are all forgiven. Every day since then, he has worked to give us a faith like this Canaanite woman had, a faith that is humble, a faith that trusts in God for everything, even when I carefully choose my doctor and rigorously follow his advice. God promises that he will build up and sustain our faith and bring us at last to eternal life.

II.

This woman shows us the kind of real life faith every Christian needs. In many ways, we may find the way that Jesus dealt with her difficult to understand. His words and actions were probably hard for her, too. But because she had that humble faith, she responded in a way that surprises us, even after hearing this story all our lives. **A great faith is a humble faith. It throws itself on Jesus' mercy.**

Jesus' words were harsh. I can think of any better word to describe them. This woman came with a desperate plea for help, and at first, Jesus didn't even answer her. How would you feel in that situation? That silence must have been maddening. But she kept crying out and asking for help and after a while, Jesus' disciples asked him to send her away. She was getting on their nerves. So Jesus turned to her and said, **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."** In other words, you don't qualify. If ever there was a moment when I would be tempted to say something really nasty, this was it. But how did she reply? She knelt before Jesus and

begged, **“Lord, help me!”** Wouldn’t you think at that point Jesus would’ve shown some compassion? But what did he say? **“It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.”** He insulted her.

I think by this time, most of us would’ve had enough. We just wouldn’t let someone treat us that way. But this woman reacted differently. She knew that her daughter’s life was on the line. So she swallowed her pride. She accepted everything Jesus said and replied, **“Yes Lord.”** Yes, I am a dog and not a part of God’s chosen people Israel. Yes, you’re right, I don’t deserve this. But then she added, **“But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”** All she wanted, all she needed, was a crumb of God’s mercy. She knew Jesus could do this. She knew he was the promised Savior and the Son of God. She was humble before her Lord and she threw herself and her daughter on the infinite mercy of Christ. And Jesus was impressed. He called her faith great and at the moment, he set her daughter free from the demon.

But why did Jesus treat her this way? He was testing her faith. Now, I’ve always struggled with that expression, because to me, at least, it seems to imply finding out how strong her faith was. Jesus already knew that she had a great and humble faith. But he wanted to demonstrate that faith. He wanted to show at least two thousand years worth of Christians what a great and humble faith is like. And he wanted to show this woman. Faith needs to be exercised. Faith needs to act. God often sends difficulties into our lives to exercise our faith, to purify it and to force it to cling to him. God sometimes puts us in a situation where we have to lay our pride aside so that we can cling to him. Humility is a virtue. God wants us to have a great faith, so God works in our lives to build that faith up. He can do all that, because he knows exactly how much stress is good for our faith and exactly how much is too much.

How often in our lives does God give us what we pray for at the moment that we ask for it? Sometimes he does. But you know what? Unless it’s really dramatic, I think it’s easier for us to forget those times. Many times in our lives, God lets us struggle. God makes us come back again and again and ask for his deliverance. God tests our faith like he tested this woman’s faith. He allows us to struggle for a while so that we have to cling to him, so that we have trust that he is going to do right by us, even when we can’t see it and we wish he’d hurry up.

In the end, God will always do what is best for us. So sometimes, he might not give us what we ask for. Sometimes, the best thing for our faith is to endure hardship. Sometimes, like he did for this woman, when he’s done exercising our faith, he then grants the thing we’ve been asking for. Our joy in him is even greater than it would’ve been if we’d gotten it right away. Sometimes he does give us what we ask for right away. But always he works for our good.

A great and humble faith accepts what he does, even when we don’t understand it. It trusts in him, even when he doesn’t give us what we want. It rejoices even in what seem like crumbs to us, because nothing Jesus does for us is ever really a crumb. There are no dogs in the kingdom of God. Because we have faith in him, we are a part of his people. This woman was indeed a part of Jesus’ people, the true Israel, the people of faith. So Jesus absolutely loved her and intended to do what was best for her before he ever when to Lebanon. He will do the same for us. My friends, trust in your Savior. Amen.