

MATTHEW 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. 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."

But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

A LIVING FAITH

Matthew 15:21-28

Life meets us on the edges of our faith—at the points of our doubts, pain, hopes and fears. For life is never stagnant and if faith is to serve us, it can never be dormant. As life moves, our faith needs to move with it. There needs to be a flexibility with our faith in as the road we are traveling takes abrupt turns, climbs over mountain passes and descends into deep valleys. We will always be encountering questions we cannot find answers for; episodes of emotional and physical suffering that change our perspectives on life and the expectations we have for it going forward; and new insights that are sometimes troubling and other times up-lifting.

Author Frederick Buechner puts it this way: “We will reverse course numerous times. It is the nature of the beast when we are dealing with unknowables, major life changes, deep cuts in our emotional lives and new discoveries that alter the landscape of our belief systems. But the key to working with the jigsaw puzzle we call life is persistence, never giving up or giving in.” In other words, the task before us is to practice a Living Faith—one that allows us to continually expand our consciousness. So this morning we shall focus our attention on exploring what it means to

have a living, breathing faith.

Our passage from Matthew takes us right to the heart of this issue from two different directions. It is quite a remarkable story because of the confrontation that occurs between the Canaanite woman and Jesus with his disciples. It would appear that Jesus was ironically the one who was having the crisis of faith—not the other way around. Let's take a closer look.

If you want to see the human side of Jesus, you need to look no further than this passage. The poor woman was in obvious distress and Jesus appears to be this very busy guy who was perhaps overwhelmed by the demands people were making upon him. *Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David*, she shouts. *My daughter is tormented by a demon.*

And what does Jesus do in response? He does *not answer her at all*. He snubs her! **Snubs** her! That's not very Christ-like. What's more, his disciples, acting as his security team then piled on, *saying, Send her away for she keeps shouting after us*. I guess with her persistent pleading, she was proving herself to be quite an annoyance. And Jesus concurs with his disciples, commenting, *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel*.

Had this been a Hebrew woman, a member of the tribe, the entire

interaction would have been totally different. But as a Canaanite, she was an unclean species to Jews and therefore an object of disdain, subject to discrimination rather than a suffering human being in need of care. While she certainly understood her standing with Jews, she remained undeterred. *But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."* Jesus then gives her his justification for his dismissiveness (he may not have even looked at her): *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.* It's hard to believe, but he just called her a dog. And it earns him a rebuke from this exceptionally wise woman. She exercises on him an emotional judo move in which she uses his energy in coming at her to reverse the advantage: *Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.*

The effect of that brilliant response was to change the consciousness of Jesus. She changed him through amazement, breaking down his previously held bias forcing him to confront a blockage in his own consciousness. *Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.* It makes me wonder if this occurred early in Jesus' ministry given the parable of the Good Samaritan in which he challenges the entire notion of clean and unclean persons.

From the woman's faith position, persistence was the key. She had

the faith that Jesus could heal her daughter, yes, but that in itself was not going to be enough. She never gave up and boy did she never give in! And from Jesus' end, he had the faith that he could heal her daughter, yes, but in order to do so, he had to be open to changing his mind about whether God valued her enough to perform the miracle. And through her persistence and her insight, she altered his perception of who she was—not just an unclean Canaanite woman, but a suffering human being.

Inside of this story are models for a Living Faith. And that is what we are after. Faith should never be dull because if we are paying attention because life is never dull. Life is full of switchbacks, interesting people, dramatic events and breath-taking discoveries. I guess if we check out of life that we have no need of a living faith. But if we stay involved, our faith allows us to embrace whatever challenges come our way and to continually expand our consciousness of what it's all about and our place in it.

Quoting Buechner once again: "Faith is better understood as a verb rather than as a noun; as a process than a possession. It is an on-again-off-again rather than once and for all. Faith is not being sure where you are going, but going anyway. A journey without maps." Doesn't this speak volumes to all of us as our church's closing day draws near?

We have to be able to live with uncertainties and unknowns. We have to face our pain when it arises and be resolute enough to realize it has something to teach us and wants to lead us into deeper levels of acceptance and understanding. We have to have the courage to confront our doubts and be willing to go into dark places where there is no light somehow trusting that Spirit is there and will guide us to place our feet on solid ground. While it is sometimes impossible to see, we must ultimately give ourselves over to an inner truth that everything has a purpose.

Two people were irrevocably changed in this drama that took place between Jesus and the Canaanite. Jesus became a more open and compassionate person. He had faith challenges every bit as much as we do and through the persistence of this woman whom God perhaps placed in his path to expand his sense of mission to be inclusive of all people, he grew in his consciousness. And because of her steadfast belief that her daughter could be healed by Jesus and her refusal let him off the hook, she received the gift of a healthy child.

We grow by our interactions with others and experience life best if we regard everyone we encounter as a teacher. We teach each other. For our faith has to be large. It cannot be boiled down into a formula. We have to adapt. We have to change. Everyone is trying to move in the

same direction so we have to help each other out. And I have faith that this is how we shall discover the kingdom of God within us.

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