

Faith Saves

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost) is Matthew 15:21-28. This text is the story of “The Faith of the Canaanite Woman.”

Tyre, Sidon, and a Canaanite woman all signal that Jesus is in pagan lands, and these places have the connotation of everything dangerous to those of Israel. Jesus is definitely in foreign territory.

Matthew paints a stark contrast between the religious leaders and the Canaanite woman. At the beginning of ch 15, the Pharisees and Sadducees reject Jesus, and he condemns their hypocrisy of using tradition to overturn God’s Word. At the beginning of ch 16, the leaders again react negatively to Jesus’ teaching, and he condemns the leaven of their heresy. Sandwiched between these two hostile exchanges with leaders of Israel are times of mercy and miracles for those in great need. Jesus restores the demon-possessed daughter to her mother, heals many who are brought to him as he teaches, and feeds the four thousand. Faith (of a Gentile! woman!) and praise from those healed stand out all the more because they are found within the context of rejection and scorn.

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus with a desperate need. She addresses Jesus as “Lord, Son of David,” which implies she is a “God-fearer” who recognizes Jesus as the promised Messiah. She is “crying out” to Jesus (crying is imperfect, indicating she kept on crying out), begging him to have mercy on her. Her urgent plea is for Jesus to help her daughter, who is “suffering terribly from demon-possession.”

Jesus is silent at first in response to the woman’s cries. He is not only testing her faith, but also testing the disciples’ understanding of his universal mission. The woman annoys the disciples by following them and disturbing the peace. They ask Jesus to “dismiss her,” which may imply, “Do what she asks, so she will go away.” Jesus’ reply to the disciples, which seems on the surface to be rather cold and unfeeling, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel,” is likely meant for the woman to overhear and further test her faith.

Apparently overhearing Jesus’ words, the woman is moved to action. She humbles herself completely, worshipfully kneeling before Jesus and pleading, “Lord, help me.” It is a prayer of faith.

Jesus answers her plea with what again seems like a cold, uncaring response. He says it is not right to take the food meant for the children and throw it to their “dogs,” literally means “little dog” and probably refers to a pet dog in the home. The woman seems to understand Jesus’ point that the promised blessings of God’s kingdom must first be shared with the Jews. But she is more than willing to settle for a few crumbs from the master’s table. She believes it would take just a few crumbs of his power and kindness to make her daughter whole again.

Jesus commends the woman’s “great faith.” Then Jesus tells the woman that her prayer of faith has been answered, and we learn that “her daughter was healed from that very hour.” This is not only a great miracle, but also a great message for the 12 disciples and for Jesus’ disciples in every age. God’s salvation is for all people.

Prayer: Lord, sometimes I have not because I ask not. Move me to pray with confidence. Amen. (TLSB)