

Sunday August 23, 2020

Lesson 12: Great Faith

Scripture: Matthew 15: 21-28; Mark 7: 24-30

Context:

We go to the Gospel of Matthew to meet another person who is different and not of the same background of Jesus. She is sometimes called the Canaanite woman and for other times she is called the Syro-Phoenician woman. Her story is one demonstrating the radical gift of faith as well as its contribution to the diversity we find in community.

The story is found both in the gospels of Matthew and Mark with varying details, and yet essentially the same story line. Jesus enters the Tyre and Sidon region and is met by this Canaanite woman. Their exchange, through modern lens, reads harshly and some readers might be amazed at how Jesus could speak to someone obviously in pain. This image of a harsh Jesus might clash with the compassion always associated with our Lord.

There are several ways to approaching an interpretation of this text. The first is to attribute the language to the gospel writer who was trying to correct some of the sentiments of inclusion among Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians.¹ Thus, we must note the text as inauthentic in some ways. The story was given as a propaganda piece.

The second way is perhaps more comfortable for modern sensibilities. Instead of seeing Jesus's response as harsh, we are to see his words as a test of her faith.² Jesus knows what her response will be, but he wants to test her. Perhaps the only problem with this reading is how it clashes with other narratives of Jesus interacting with people in the text.

The third way of reading this text is to accept it as it stands. The story presents Jesus as a first century Jewish man living in that world; his perspective changed by this bold woman.³ The problem with this interpretation would be giving an anti-Semitic lens towards Jesus and also deem all men of that time as chauvinistic in how they treated others.

All these ways are proposals though. They are all conjectural with no supporting evidence to permit one final choice over the others.⁴ We may of course have one we

¹ Hare, Douglas R.A. "Matthew," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for First and Second Kings*, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 176.

² *Ibid.*, 176-177.

³ *Ibid.*, 177.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 177.

prefer over the others, yet we cannot definitively deem it as authoritative.

To a degree, one could solely focus on the emphasis of faith, especially how Matthew presents it in comparison to Mark. It is by the woman's faith that Jesus heals her daughter.⁵ We are reminded all may come to our Lord in faith.

Application

This story is always one to catch me off guard. While I love Jesus showing passion and bringing some holy fervor, his conversation with the Canaanite woman does not compute with how I know Jesus. In fact, I imagine my mama would wash my mouth out with soap if she ever heard me talk that way to another woman, even as a grown adult!

Perhaps the reason the story is so important today is twofold. First, we hear of a woman who does not intimately know Jesus. He is a stranger in her land and yet she is drawn to him. She is desperate to save her child and places her faith in someone she has heard as a miracle worker. She is persistent in getting ahold of him and making sure her child is healed.

What I like about this woman is her deep faith even when things are hard. She doesn't know everything about Jesus and yet she is willing to place great faith in him even when she doesn't know what will happen. For us, this faith is something we should look forward to in our own walk with Christ.

From personal experience, some of the people with the deepest faith I know are those who have experienced great pain in the life. Or if they themselves have not experienced it, they have watched others go through trials and tribulations. What has remained for them when there is nothing to be had is faith. There is faith in the God who will deliver and be with them no matter what happens. Even if everything seems hopeless, faith gives them what they need to make it and face the next day.

The Canaanite woman teaches us how to have deep faith even when the odds seem against you. Faith is not about believing God will bless you because you are a special person or everything is going your way. Faith is about placing our hope in the things we cannot see and trusting the mighty power of our God.

The second thing we can learn from the Canaanite woman is the inclusivity of the gospel. Regardless of how disturbed we might be by Jesus's response to the woman, he does heal her daughter and commends her on her faith. All of those around him witness this encounter and see Jesus interacting with someone of a different group. Like the stories with the Samaritans, we see our Lord interacting with different people who are to be included in God's story.

The older I have gotten, the more I have realized how diverse the Christian body can be. I am not just talking about the diversity we might see from a Christian in Uganda compared to a Christian in the United States. I am talking about the diversity of the Christian faith in our churches and communities.

Usually, where we get ourselves into trouble as a community of faith is when we think our understanding of the gospel is the only one out there. Tribes and factions can

⁵ Ibid. , 178.

also cause us to lose sight of how diverse the body of Christ may be. As we lose sight of our diversity and see it as something to eradicate, we end up damaging our witness as we fight with one another. Perhaps their view point gives us a different understanding about Jesus and even something to challenge us. We are called to see each other as brothers and sisters with differences, which actually may make our witness stronger.

What interpretation have you heard of this story? What does faith mean to you? Who are strong examples of people with a deep faith in your life? How can you learn to live and love those who hold different opinions than you? Why do you think Jesus heals someone who doesn't belong to "his tribe?" Who does Jesus heal today? How can we celebrate diversity within our communities of faith?

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