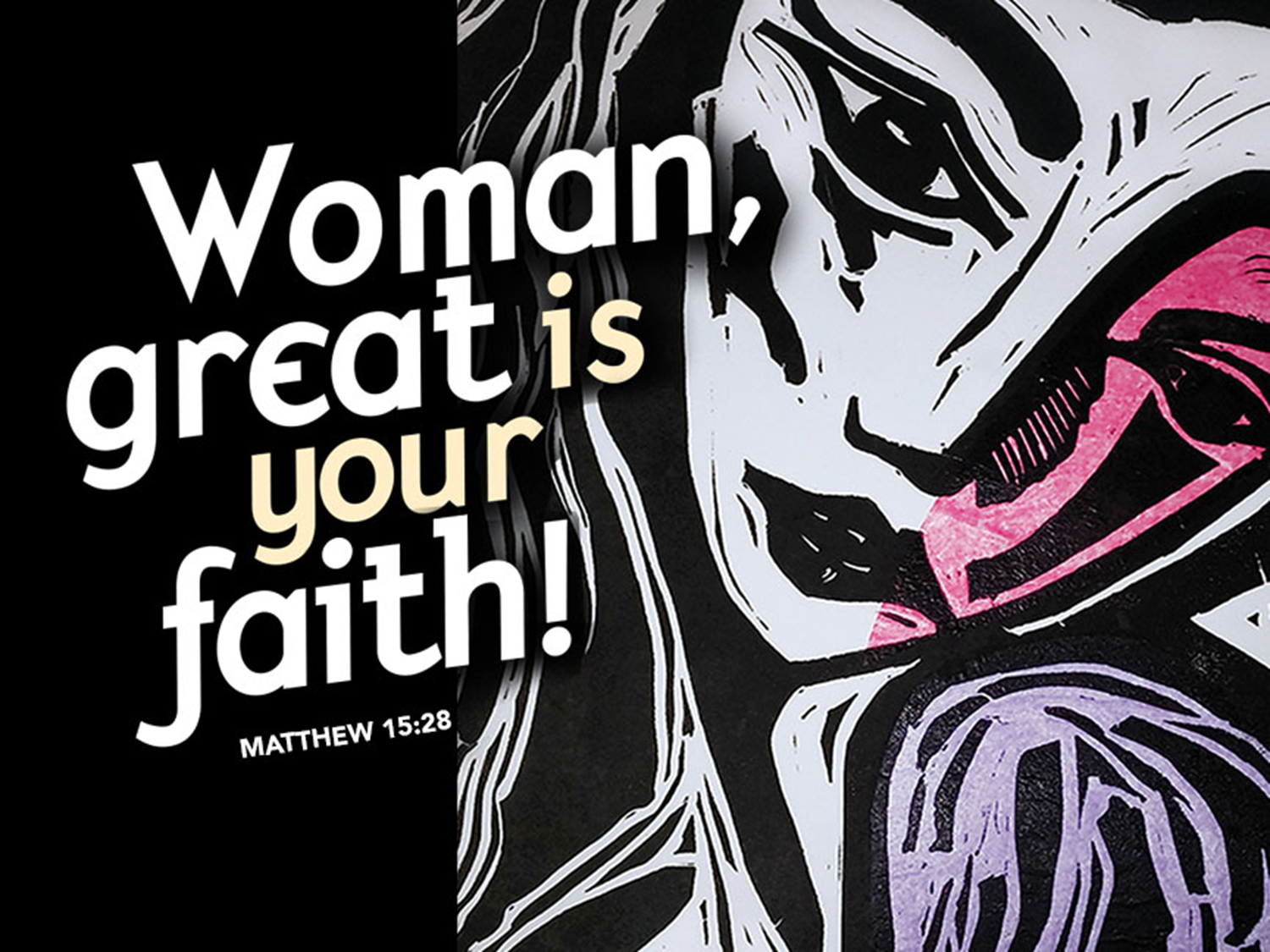
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**What Is This Great Faith?**

**August 20, 2017**

**Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28**

Grace and peace to you from God Our Father and from the savior of the whole world, Jesus Christ Our Lord, amen.

On Thanksgiving Day Snoopy took one look at the dog food and said, "This isn’t fair. The rest of the world today is eating turkey with all the trimmings and all I get is dog food. Because I’m a dog," he said, "all I get is dog food." He stood there and stared at his dog food for a moment and said, "I guess it could be worse. I could be a turkey." Maybe Snoopy would have been happier with the scraps from the table, but when he understood he was a dog he realized he had something to be thankful for.

This Gospel story is one of the best stories ever. It takes us completely by surprise and turns everything we thought we knew about Jesus upside down. At the same time, I find this story to be so true to life and so practical in describing faith it seems to be the template for how my encounters with prayer have been all my life. One reason this story is so interesting is the way Jesus seems to act contrary to what we usually think about our loving, compassionate, and inclusive Savior. I mean think about the sequence of events. Jesus first acts with indifference, totally ignoring this poor, desperate woman’s request for Jesus to heal her demon possessed daughter. Who hasn’t felt ignored by God from time to time. My prayers do seem to go unanswered for long periods. Then the disciples put her down by asking him to send her away because she’s screaming and interrupting their vacation. Sometimes the devil, in this case acting through the disciples, plants ideas in our heads that we’re not worthy of even bothering Jesus with our needs and desires. Then finally, Jesus himself denies her request, reminding her that he was sent to Israel first and it wouldn’t be fair or morally right to give the gifts meant for the Children of God to the puppy dog under the table. Wow, at first glance this story really brings Jesus down a peg or two! If this story’s main purpose were to describe our prayer interactions with God through Jesus it raises more questions than it solves.

I’ve read some commentaries that claim the woman instructs Jesus or teaches Jesus about love and who God really wants to include in God’s Kingdom. Others have suggested this story shows how you can get what you need from God if you have great enough faith and persistence in continued prayer. Again, that’s not my experience with prayer and is another thing about this story that makes me say, hmmm…

I think I might be able to clear up a couple of these weird idiosyncrasies. When I come across a hard story the first thing I try to do so take a step back and look at what’s around it. What comes before and after. This helps to put the story into a context and helps to get the big picture of what’s going on. If we do that here we find that the entire chapter of Matthew is concerned with ritual purity. What makes a person clean or unclean. In the perspective of the religious leaders of that time ritual purity determined who was inside or outside of God’s Kingdom. Just a few verses before today’s text, Jesus had gotten into a great argument with the religious leaders. I know, big surprise, right?... This time it was over who is ritually pure and who isn’t. Jesus told them it isn’t what goes into your mouth that makes you defiles, but rather it’s what comes from your heart and out of your mouth that defiles.

So, as our Gospel begins today, Jesus left that place and went up north far into Gentile country. He wanted to get away from the religious leaders and was hoping for a time of retreat with his disciples. Coming so closely on the heels of that great clean-unclean debate with the religious leaders Matthew is giving us an object lesson in what purity actually looks like in the real world. The debate just before this is sort of the theoretical or theological argument and now we get to see how it plays out in life as we know it.

So, to get a feel for who this woman is let’s examine what we know about her. Matthew tells us she’s a Canaanite and is from the region known as Tyre and Sidon. This little piece of information tells us a great deal about who this woman is. The Canaanites were the Palestinian people who inhabited the Promised Land when Joshua took possession. The Bible says God ordered Joshua to kill every man, woman, child, and all the animals as well. Joshua did not complete that order to the fullest extent and instead left a remnant. This woman is a descendant of that remnant. She is part of the race that had been persecuted and oppressed, beaten down and nearly obliterated from the face of the earth. Do you think there was much hatred and animosity between the Israelites and the Canaanites? You bet there was! So, as we look at this woman we see she has many strikes against her. She’s a woman, a Gentile, a despised Canaanite, and her daughter is possessed by a demon. You can’t get more unclean than that. You can’t be more of an outsider than that. When Matthew picked a character to depict an outsider of the Jewish faith, he took it to the extreme. She had a few more issues than simply failing to follow the ritual handwashing the Pharisees had been complaining about a few verses back.

By all normal acceptable practices, Jesus followed the letter of the Law. Yet, through this encounter, he saw something rarely found so far in his ministry. He found great faith. Jesus had only said that about one other person, ever. That person was also a Gentile, a non-Jew, an outsider. Remember the story about the Centurion soldier with the slave who had leprosy? He sent word by messenger to Jesus saying that he wasn’t worthy to even be in the presence of Jesus, but still he knew Jesus had the power to heal his beloved slave. So, Jesus had been in ministry for some time now and only found great faith in two people and both of them were non-Jewish, outsiders. Both considered unclean by Jewish religious standards.

All this is interesting, but so far not much help in our everyday lives. Perhaps we need to unpack what Jesus calls great faith in order to make sense of this story for us. How this faith thing works can be seen by comparing the Centurion and the Canaanite woman and contrasting both of them with someone Jesus said had little faith.

When we compare the two people Jesus says have great faith what I find is a description of someone who knows where they stand in relation to God. How many times have you heard someone ask, “Are you right with God?” The implication clearly being you’d better get yourself right before it’s too late and you end up outside the Kingdom in the darkness where there is weeping gnashing of teeth. Well these two know they aren’t “right with God” and they know there’s nothing they can do to rectify their situation. The Canaanite woman doesn’t argue with Jesus over her station in life. When Jesus says it isn’t fair or morally right to give the children’s bread to the dogs, she doesn’t go running for a lawyer to sue Jesus or to CNN to expose his politically incorrect words. She knows where she stands and her appeal isn’t based on her standing. Her appeal is based entirely on her lack of standing. Both this woman and the Centurion soldier appeal to Jesus’ mercy. Lord have mercy! She cries. That’s not the prayer of a proud upright Christian. That’s the prayer of someone who’s desperate and only had hope in one thing, the mercy of Almighty God.

Now contrast that with a person Jesus said had little faith, Peter from last week’s Gospel story. Last week Peter was actually walking on the stormy sea only to begin sinking when he took his eyes off Jesus and became afraid because of the wind and the waves. After Jesus rescued him, he said to Peter, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Peter’s plea from last week was, “If you are Jesus, command me to come to you on the water.” If it’s you Jesus! Really Peter! Oh, wait, it’s easy to criticize Peter, but how many of my prayers start out with the word “IF.”

But this story isn’t mainly about prayer. It’s about clean-unclean, insiders and outsiders. Today I wonder who we consider as outsiders. Today I wonder how Jesus would have us relate to the Canaanites of today. In the polarized climate of today’s politics, is there any way our Christian values can help both sides learn to love? I believe in the example Jesus set all the way back in the first century, breaking the boundaries that separated Jews and Canaanites, we can find hope for today. When we begin to lose our pride, and become so desperate for the love of our neighbor then we might see the other as a person of value and worth. Until then, my prayer is that of the woman of great faith. Lord have mercy on us!

May the Lord have mercy on us. May the Lord be gracious to us. May the Lord look on us with kindness. And Lord please give us peace. Give us peace in our hearts, peace in our Churches, and peace in our nation and in all the world. Amen!