



Morrison Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church

www.mzluth.org

August 10, 2008

13th Sunday after Pentecost

Matthew 15:21-28

Pastor Randy Ott

First Lesson: Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm of the Day: Psalm 133-134

Second Lesson: Romans 11:13-15, 28-32

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Do You Have Great Faith?

Great faith knows its place

Great faith knows its object

Great faith clings to God's Word

We are kind of fickle at times in how we describe greatness, aren't we? The Olympics are just starting and I was watching Michael Phelps swim last night, winning the 400 individual gold medal. I kind of remember back four years ago when he went to the Olympics and the talk was that he was going to win eight gold medals. Then he disappointed people, evidently, by only winning six gold medals, a silver and a bronze. I remember reading some articles afterwards of how people were saying how disappointing it was. Six gold medals and somehow we end up being disappointed. Aren't we kind of goofy? Just to be an Olympic athlete, in my mind, is great.

But we are that way. Greatness is different. It's always changing in our minds, depending on our situation, depending on our mood, depending on how cranky we are—we will define greatness in different ways on different days of the week, won't we? That's why it's kind of interesting to gather together this morning and have our God define for us greatness—greatness of faith.

Jesus sets before us this example of this Canaanite woman. It's one of the two times in Scripture that he uses the phrase "great faith." One was with this Canaanite woman. The other was with a Centurion—both of them Gentiles—people who didn't have all the advantages, people who didn't have the advantage of being the people of God like the Jews did, but people who show us the very nature of what it means to have a great faith. So it's kind of interesting to consider it this morning. It's also kind of humbling, because when I look at what this woman did and I try to put myself in her shoes and I think about whether or not I would have stayed there that long and persisted that long—would my faith have been that great? I kind of doubt it.

Think about what this woman went through. Jesus is heading to the region of Tyre and Sidon by the Sea of Galilee. Last week we were talking about Peter walking on water and then sinking into the water and Jesus admonishing about having weak faith—"Oh you of little faith! Why did you start doubting?" In the next chapter we see Jesus showing the disciples and us what great faith is. As he left that region, he was going towards Tyre and Sidon, this woman, wherever Jesus was at that time, comes up and she finds Jesus. She greets him with the title "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" She greets him with a messianic title. So that tells you that this woman understood something about Jesus, right? That His claim that He was more than just a rabbi—she

believed evidently that He was more than just a rabbi, but that He was the Messiah, the One that was promised. Here she is. She lived in an area with the Canaanites, and she was a Canaanite—the people that were supposed to have been driven out and completely eradicated by Joshua. But they stayed there. They didn't drive them all the way out. They worshipped false gods, and they had horrible pagan practices, and she lived in the midst of it. Yet somehow, some way, God's Gospel found her, worked in her heart, and now she recognizes just how hopeless her situation is. She had nothing that she could do to change it. Her daughter was suffering terribly from demon possession and her love for her daughter and her trust in Jesus drove her to find Jesus.

Put yourself in her shoes. You have that belief that he is the Messiah. You have a daughter that is suffering terribly. You are a Canaanite. He is a Jew. There is that inborn friction between the two. So you find Him and you cry out "Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me!" You are thrilled when you see Him. You are rejoicing as you speak those words, and you are greeted with resounding silence.

How are you feeling now? Evidently she persisted, right? Although Jesus was saying nothing, she must have continued to say things because the disciples eventually get sick of it. Here you are pleading with the one whom you believe is your savior, the one who has the ability to help your daughter, and you are met with silence. Then the next thing you hear is His inner circle, His disciples going to Jesus and saying, "Just send her away if you aren't going to do anything. She is getting kind of annoying. She is getting on my nerves. Get rid of her."

How are you feeling now? Are you ready to tuck tail and walk home? Maybe you are wrong. Maybe your faith is misplaced. If you start relying on your outward senses, you might start coming to that conclusion, right? Then Jesus answers. Finally He says something. You see His lips begin to move and you are all excited, and what do you hear? Something that doesn't answer your pleas, doesn't answer what the disciples said, just the statement, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."

Now you know he is talking to you, right? Because you are not the lost sheep of Israel—you are outside of that flock. He is telling you, "I am not here for you." Now is your blood starting to boil? Are you starting to get irritated with Him? I have to believe that I might have been. I don't know about you, but I think that would be putting my faith about to its limits at times depending on what kind of mood I'm in, how much sleep I had and how cranky I am.

But look at what she does. Jesus just verbally kind of slapped her across the face. At least that is what it sounds like, doesn't it? "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel."—that's not you! But this woman's faith, and remember faith doesn't rely on the sense, right? Faith is being sure of what we can't see. Here is a woman who is certain of what she can't see. Because what she can see is that she can do nothing on her own to save herself or to change her daughter's predicament, and her faith is going to lead her not to put her trust in what she is hearing but in what her heart knows to be true because the Spirit has worked faith in her heart.

She comes and kneels before the guy who says, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” And she cries out again, “Lord, help me!” When is the last time you knelt before anyone to ask for anything? Most of you men here when you proposed probably didn’t even get down on one knee, did you? Look at how she is humbling herself saying, “I am nothing. You are everything.” I can’t see myself necessarily doing that after what Jesus had said to her. I don’t know about you.

Then He answers her, right? What does He say this time? “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” What did you just call me? Is that what you might be thinking? Dogs?! Children’s bread and throw it to their dogs? You’re saying I’m a dog?! I don’t know if I would be on my knees anymore. The greatness of this woman’s faith though is that she gets beyond the emotional things, sets aside what her reason would tell her—trust the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding—she gets beyond all those things that her sinful nature no doubt was screaming in her mind, and she trusts God’s promises. And her trust in God’s promises leads her to hear something in His words. She listened to His words.

You know how it is when our emotions get running. Quite often we don’t hear what the other person is saying anymore because our emotions are boiling, right? Have you ever done that? You think about what you are going to say back and you don’t hear everything they say? That’s how we are. But great faith focuses on the Words of God. And here Jesus used a word for “dogs” that in English we kind of lose it because English is just not as precise necessarily as the Greek language is in this case because the word, at least that we have in the Greek Bible, is a word that is for the “wild marauding dogs, the vicious dogs.” That’s not the word He uses. There is another word for dog that describes that. Instead He uses the word “dog” that is a house pet—a dog that belongs at the table. A dog that does, as the woman says, “get the crumbs” because they fall off the table and they get it or the kid gives a little crumb to Fido under the table.

She hears this message that even though she doesn’t get the choicest part, that He isn’t sent directly for her, she still belongs there at the table. And that is how she answers. “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She got through silence. She got through being called a dog. She got through the disciples’ complaining, and she clung to His word and to His promises and that’s why Jesus calls her faith “great.” She knew her place. She was a sinner that had no claim to this mercy from God. But she knew the object of her faith and she kept clinging to it and kept going to it and kept persisting and crying out to Him trusting that He would do what was best. And then she clung to that Word so desperately that Jesus spoke that sometimes our own reason would cause us to miss.

This is the nature of great faith. It relies on God, not on our own reason, and that’s a challenge I think for you and me. When we are going through difficult times, when our reason looks around and we see heartache or hardship, when we see trouble and difficulty, when we see things not as we would like them to be but we see things as they are and it’s a whole different direction from where we want them to be, our reason tells us it’s God’s fault. Our reason tells us it must be that God is possibly punishing us, or maybe He’s mad at us or maybe He is not a “God of love.” And sometimes then we

lose sight of His precious promises because we are so bound up in our own emotions. The object of our faith is not our emotions and not our reason and not our attitude. The object of our faith is God—the Triune God who acts in love toward us, whether we can understand how He is acting in love toward us or not.

There are times that you and I doubt that and when we do, we often cross over to sin, sinful doubt of our God's love and His promises. I look at this woman's faith and I don't think I would have gotten as far as she did, and I would have sinned. I don't know about you, but put yourself in her shoes and see if you would have gotten that far.

But here is the nature of the object of our faith. The object of our faith loves us and died for our sins in spite of the fact that our faith is not always great. Our faith at times becomes very weak. Our faith at times is that glowing ember that Jesus said He will not extinguish but that He will send us His love in the Gospel, in the Word, in Baptism and in the Lord's Supper to forgive our sins where our faith has fallen short and to say to us "I love you and I have taken away the sins of your doubt and of your uncertainty, the sins of your relying on your own understanding and not digging into my Word to see my promises and to have my Spirit strengthen you so that you can face these difficulties."

But He also says to each one of us that we have the potential for great faith because we have the Word and the Sacraments. We have God speaking to us day by day in His Word. We have every morning when we wake up the assurance that we are baptized children of God who have been clothed with His righteousness. We have this day His very body and blood in, with and under the bread and the wine that says to us, "I love you. I have forgiven you. Depart in peace. You are forgiven."

And as we cling to that, and as we grow in that, our faith gets greater day by day. We recognize it's not our doing. It's God's doing. And then we too become those whom Jesus describes as having "great faith." And then we have the privilege and the joy of not only living in that faith and the blessings that come to us individually, but we have the privilege and joy of building one another up here in the body of Christ in our congregation. And we have the privilege and joy of sharing that with those who don't yet know Christ. And there is nothing more enjoyable than that.

Michael Phelps last night talked about how great it was to win his first gold medal and to look up into the stands and see his mom all excited and to recognize that he had won the gold medal. To see his mom and his coach he said, "It just doesn't get any better than that." It does. You and I are experiencing it right now. We are forgiven children of God, and we get to live for Him!