

# “Faith that Can Save Us”

St. Matthew 15:21-28

<sup>21</sup> Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. <sup>22</sup> A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.” <sup>23</sup> Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” <sup>24</sup> He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” <sup>25</sup> The woman came and knelt before him. “Lord, help me!” she said. <sup>26</sup> He replied, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” <sup>27</sup> “Yes it is, Lord,” she said. “Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” <sup>28</sup> Then Jesus said to her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed at that moment.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

## 1. Introduction.

It is a pleasure and a joy to greet you all this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus, and to bring you the greetings of my parish in Hurlingham along with the churches in the United States and in Canada with which I am connected, and which wish you all the blessing of God upon your lives. We share together a marvelous church, and what is more, we share a marvelous Savior.

Now, this connection that we have is not something that can be truly understood by those who do not share it. Generally speaking, we live within a world where God and the things of God have no real importance for most people. There usually exists among those around us a certain cautious reserve, a certain doubt in the existence of God, a certain despising of the Word of God, and often a strong sense and conviction that there is no need for God (despite any lingering desire that there might be for him). We live within a context in which faith is an extraordinary, perhaps even crazy, luxury for the practical person. Faith has become inaccessible for the common and average, for those who might, reluctantly or otherwise, call themselves sinners rather than saints.

So, for this reason, the figure of the Canaanite woman in our reading from Matthew’s Gospel this morning can surprise us, even shock us, with the force of her character. She comes to Jesus with something inside that appears to modern eyes like something that borders on madness, outside of the realm of all expectation, of all comfort, and of all that is normal. But in the end, she receives what she begs: the salvation of her daughter and, by extension, her salvation as well.

Jesus puts it into words like this: “Woman, how great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you desire.” The evangelist, much like Jesus himself, communicates to us in this story that *Jesus saves us through true faith*. Now, it may appear that there are few who have true faith; after all, she alone among the Canaanites in the region received what she desired. And it may also appear that without faith, there is neither promise nor hope of receiving salvation; after all, if she had not believed, she her daughter would probably not have been saved. To wit, true faith can appear to be uncommonly strange and weird.

But it is indeed true that, just as that woman came to health and salvation in Jesus through true faith, we also can come to salvation, hope, new life, and forgiveness in Jesus

through faith that is similarly true. So comes the question: What is this faith like that can save us? In other words, what should I be doing in order to develop the kind of faith that has true power and life in Jesus? Let us turn to our text this morning to find an answer waiting for us.

## 2. The Search.

The first facet of faith in this story is that *true faith searches for Jesus*. Faith does not rest until it has found its rest in him, found in him a foundation for hope, found in him an anchor for the soul, a rock of refuge and of deliverance.

I say this because human life is always characterized by the search for something or someone. As human beings, we look for happiness, for the meaning of life, for survival, or for whichever thing appears to us to be most important, most desirable, and most permanent. Life is searching, and searching for us who are sinners always ends in frustration, thirst, and death.

And I think for this reason the woman from our reading is so highlighted here by Matthew. She shows real faith in her tremendous search for Jesus. First, we can focus on the searching itself. This unnamed woman leaves her community, her county and her town, in order to meet up with Jesus. For a woman alone in Phoenicia, this was probably an arduous and dangerous trip. What she does not do is stay where she already is. She does not say to herself, "Well, I already know that I believe in Jesus, that he can save my daughter. I can believe just as well here without getting up from my comfy chair." Instead, she knows that healing has neither power nor value nor meaning unless she has Jesus himself as well. She must search for the one who is searching for her, his lost sheep; in fact, without the action of leaving, of going, and of searching, her faith would be shown to be a sham.

But second, we can focus on the object of her search: Jesus. This Canaanite woman does not search for just anyone, be he teacher or political leader or shaman. This woman was a pagan from a pagan land, serving other gods other than the Living God according to the pantheon of her people, with their rites, their priests, their temples, and their hopes. But she abandons all of this and she cries out to Jesus along the road, "Lord, have mercy upon me, Son of David!" That is to say, she knows who Jesus is. She knows that he is the descendent of David, come as God's Son to be God's emissary. She knows that he has come to deliver his people not only from their political oppressors but also from their sins. She knows that he is unique, uniquely qualified to be the only King, the only Lord, and the only Savior. She calls upon him because she has heard a Message, even though she dwells in Tyre and Sidon, a Message of a Messiah who has come to the Jews to inaugurate the Kingdom of Heaven that by then had drawn near.

It is just as important for us that we search for Jesus in the same way: that it be a genuine search, and that we search for a genuine Jesus. The Message that this woman had heard has only been amplified since Jesus' visit to Phoenicia: we now have the glorious message that his Father's purposes were entirely fulfilled as he gave his life on the cross for us, and rose again from the dead on the third day. What could possibly detain us from passionately searching for this Jesus to have him in our lives as well?

To give you all an example of this kind of search, some years ago I had a girlfriend who lived in another state from mine, on the other side of the continent. I had promised to visit her for the first time being apart one week, but when I checked in and got ready to board the plane, we found out that there were mechanical problems. And this girl was waiting for me as I had promised. What is more, that week there had been snowstorms throughout the whole United States, and all the flights were full with passengers trying to get places: there was no space on any flight going her way. But I made the decision to take the only flight to another city five hours away from hers. I subsequently drove to her parents' home, getting lost and draining the battery of my cell phone in the process. I arrived at 4:00 AM instead of 4:00 PM as I had planned. It was, in fact, a miracle that I got there at all.

But I got there. And the young lady was up at 4:00 AM waiting for me with dinner. Beloved brothers and sisters, true faith requires that kind of search to meet with the Lord, the Son of David, our King and our Savior. We need to search for Jesus with our whole heart, and we ought to make sure that it is in fact the Jesus who can save us: he who in love for us died and rose and will come again, and no other. For those of us who take on this journey, this pilgrimage, this search, all to be with Jesus and receive from him, we will never be disappointed or put to shame. If we seek him, we will find him, waiting for us with his riches and his blessing.

Where are you in your searching? Are you tired, ready to leave off the race and go to the sidelines? Or, are you following a false Jesus instead of the Jesus of the Bible who spilled his blood to save you? Perhaps you have not even begun your search for Jesus, but are spending your time searching for other things. Wherever you are, I encourage and plead with you to come to Jesus. He indeed can give you life, forgiveness, and salvation.

### **3. The Surrender.**

The second facet of faith in this story is that *true faith surrenders to Jesus*. The believer cannot simply put himself or herself to one side, maintaining distance, defending a foolhardy autonomy; instead, faith requires an act of submission, of surrender, of giving oneself to him in whom we place our trust.

Faith stands in sharp contrast to the attitude that we naturally tend to display. Since the Garden of Eden, the great god among all the gods that we have invented is our own autonomy: we want to be like God. We want to do what we want to do, go where we want to go, enjoy what we want to enjoy, and be what we want to be, all without any limit, higher authority, or obedience. The odd thing is that our current Western culture, far from opposing and restricting this natural tendency, actually cultivates and encourages it.

But, the attitude of this woman shows that true faith is different: instead of being a declaration of independence in autonomy, faith is an act of abandoning the right to self-sufficiency whether before man or before God, all in order to surrender ourselves to God through Jesus Christ. In today's Gospel, Jesus comes to highlight this side of faith in his dialogue with the Canaanite woman. First, he says nothing in answer to her pleas, but later after the disciples get involved, Jesus reminds her that he was not sent by his

Father to the heathen nations, but to the “lost sheep of the house of Israel.” He had come to those who had accepted at one time the yoke of the covenant that God had made with his people on Mt. Sinai, and not with those peoples who had never submitted themselves to his covenant, his dominion, or his rule.

But she shows something that Jesus of course already knew: that submission (or the lack of it) is not genetic. There were other sheep from another fold to reach and to save, and she through her faith renders him the worship and dutiful surrender that only true faith can bring about. Having heard Jesus, this woman actually comes up to him. Putting herself at his feet, she prostrates herself in the dust in a simple act of adoration. Her posture represents so clearly that he is her Lord and she is his servant, that she belongs to him, that she depends upon him, that she is completely his. And in this posture and profound coming, she says simply, “Lord, help me.”

True faith for us is the same: it requires a complete surrender. It requires that we abandon both our sinful deeds and our claim to righteousness on the basis of our good deeds, and that we put ourselves completely in the hands of the man who loved us, who surrender up himself to suffering and to death on our behalf. His surrender was total as was his love, and through his love we can surrender ourselves to him as a reflection of his love for us.

I see this kind of surrender constantly when it comes to the love between a parent and a child, especially when the kids are small. A child trusts in a mother or father in the face either of danger or of joy, because the child has experienced the love that the parent has for him or her. That child, recognizing that love, responds not only with affection but also with delight in playing, in obeying, in being with the parents who love him or her. The child can surrender himself or herself completely and, in doing that is completely happy.

Where are you in this process of surrender? Are you fighting to hand over to Jesus your sins and your triumphs, your defects and your strengths, your whole self? Or do you, knowing how Jesus surrendered himself for you, continuing to resist the sweet call to give up your life, body and soul, to the Jesus who bought you once and for all with his blood? I beg you, beloved in the Lord, that “you offer your bodies as living sacrifices to God, holy and acceptable to him,” that it be your spiritual act of worship. You will not be disappointed: in surrendering yourself, you will find yourself, created and re-created by the God who loves you.

#### **4. The Stubbornness.**

The third facet of faith in this story is that *true faith does not let go of Jesus*. Acting with profound patience, faith will not let anything get permanently between the believer and Jesus, but instead with strength and determination stubbornly persists in embracing Jesus no matter the cost.

For most of us, achieving a level of stubbornness in faith can be difficult in any sphere of life. Generally speaking, we are proud individuals: we do not want to be wounded, hurt, rejected, ignored, or forgotten as we have been so many times in the past. And to keep us

safe from this proud pain, we protect ourselves from false love by being the first to distance ourselves, first to let go, first to leave be it from a room or from a friendship. And at times, we are simply being “realists”: “He said ‘no’ I don’t know *how* many times. I had better believe him that ‘no’ is the answer.” It would be better to accept distance and rejection than to actually place faith in a person who could potentially cause me harm.

And so this Canaanite woman of faith can really be confusing: her faith does not let go of Jesus no matter what he says to her. We have already seen that Jesus stays quiet when she follows him pleading and crying and shouting. Frankly, Jesus seems rather cold and hard with her. Then, he says that he came not for her nor for her people, but rather for others. But she persists in asking for mercy! Then, Jesus tells her that it would be inappropriate for him to take away blessings from the children (that is to say, from the Jews) in order to bless the dogs (that is to say, her). Any literally minded person would have turned back by now, and the emotionally sensitive person would have gone home hours before.

But she continues with dogged enthusiasm and tenacity, grabbing hold of the possibility that, though a dog, she might live in the house and eat from the table. She implores him with utmost sincerity (if with a bit of wry humor) that, just as the puppies eat the scraps from their masters’ table, she also wants to be at her Lord’s table and receive (as it were) by adoption what Israel receives by the power of God. And it is in this moment that Jesus joyfully grants her the healing and rescue that she is asking for, and in which we can observe the great power and love of Jesus.

Why did she not turn back? It was because she had faith in him. She had understood who this Jesus was, and she had believed that he was capable of doing what she needed. She recognized not only her need but her incapacity before her difficulties, and she would not let go of Jesus until he fulfilled what she knew to be his promise and his plan. Even though Jesus refused to speak, even when he appeared hard, even when he spoke harshly towards her and there seemed to be no chance that he would save her, she continued believing, continued trying to know Jesus, her Savior and her Lord.

For us as well, true faith always has a streak of stubbornness. The reality for the majority of us is that we live a great portion of our lives without hearing the audible voice of God. We cannot see his face, we cannot feel his hands, we cannot smell nor taste his scent. There can be moments when his inexplicable lack of detectability can cause us great hurt and pain: it can make our faith appear to be in vain. Where is our Savior, after all?

So far in my own life, I was most struck by these questions while I was in college: there seemed to be no satisfactory answer to my questions and longing for God’s salvation in tangible ways. It felt for over a year as though God had hidden his face from me, as though God had abandoned me. I disliked his Word, my life seemed hard and worthless, and I felt nothing of peace. I had days, weeks, months, asking myself whether I really believed or not? But by God’s mercy and grace my faith was not dead, and it won the victory.

It won the victory because it could not let go of Jesus. Jesus was too great and too good not to be true for me and true to me: by God’s mercy I was able to feast my soul on Christ, who loved me, died for me, rose again for me, and I was able to make my

struggles a moment to turn to my Savior Jesus. Faith may struggle on the road, but it will have the victory in the end, precisely because the one whom my faith will not let go is the one who would not let go of me. To hold on to me Jesus gave his life on the cross, rose again, intercedes for me, and will come again: he will not abandon me to my sins and my weakness. I can rest and trust that “he who began a good work will bring it to completion on the day of Christ Jesus.” And in a certain sense, that sort of trusting and resting is what faith is all about.

Where are you in the fight to believe? Are you struggling with doubts, with frustrations, with intellectual barriers and perhaps even with the fear that you might lose sight of Jesus? Are you feeling left behind and abandoned by a God who seems too distant to be of any comfort or use to you? Beloved in the Lord let me encourage you to stay faithful to Jesus, to never let go of him, to be filled with holy stubbornness in grasping hold of Christ. We have a faithful Savior in the Lord Jesus: let us be faithful to him as well.

### **5. Conclusion.**

We live in a time in history characterized by pragmatic unbelief in many things, especially in God, and it can be difficult to carry on believing when there seems to be so little encouragement around us. But it is worth it all to believe, because it is in believing that we receive, that we conquer, that we come to this Jesus who heals the sick, who casts out demons, and who raises the dead, and who loves you and me so much.

And if it seems difficult to believe, and you cannot seem to conjure up faith within you: do not be afraid. The trick to faith which has worked for saints and sinners, elders and youngsters, wise and foolish alike is this: fix your eyes on Christ. Fill your mind and your heart with the glory of his character, with the majesty of his salvation for sinners, and the magnitude of his free offer to change your life, to forgive your sins, and to give you resurrection on the last day. Do not look at your faith, but look at the Author and Perfector of your faith. If you do that, everything else will sort itself in the end.

For just as the Canaanite woman named him three times in our story this morning, Jesus is the Lord. He is entrusted not only with saving us but also with bringing us to that eternal glory which he shares with his Father and with the Holy Spirit. May this one God and three Persons bless you with all grace, peace, and love and to our Lord Jesus Christ be all praise, power, dominion, and honor forever and ever. Amen.

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