



Pentecost 11-August 16, 2020

Baltic and East Nidaros Lutheran Parish

Matthew 15:10-28

“Woman, Great is Your Faith!”

Sermon by Pastor Randall J. Questad

*I believe the gospel reading for today is one of the hardest to hear and understand in all of scripture. It is difficult because of what Jesus says. We hear words from Jesus that don't sound like words he should say. It's hard to make sense it when Jesus who just fed thousands of people without their asking for food, now decides to withhold crumbs from a woman who is begging to receive even a scrap of a blessing that has fallen from our Lord's table? It seems that Jesus who is described as “full of compassion” ran out? Maybe that is why Jesus begins our reading for today by saying, “**Listen and understand**”.*

To begin to comprehend what sounded like an unholy response from Jesus to this Canaanite woman, it is helpful to know the backstory of what led up to this event. I am almost reluctant to even give the background to this story. For the same reason I would like to pretend that I don't see large gaps between people in the pews today. Maybe I want to forget about the Coronavirus for a few minutes on this Sabbath day. But God's word is unavoidably relatable to every generation and today is no exception. So, when you hear what led up to the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, it is honestly humorous what caused the Pharisees to point out to Jesus what his disciples were doing wrong.

The Pharisees had just watched Jesus' disciples eat without properly washing their hands. So, they pointed their fingers at Jesus and told him, “Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands before they eat.” So here we are more than 2000 years later still pointing fingers at people because they are not doing what they should to be safe such as washing their hands.

Without hesitation, Jesus does some finger pointing of his own after the Pharisees tattle on his disciples. Jesus doesn't deny that his disciples didn't wash their hands or long enough or with the right kind of soap. Instead, Jesus, and I can believe he did so in a bit of a snarky tone, pointed his finger at the elders and answered them with, “And why do you break the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition?” Jesus tells the tattlers that they have been breaking the fourth commandment of honoring father and mother by rejecting his authority. So, Jesus' disciples came to him and told him “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense to what you said?” And you can guess what Jesus said to that.

What happened between the Pharisees and Jesus is the same as what always happens when trying to get law right. It is happening a lot lately and maybe we can blame the pandemic for some of our impatience as we wait for some normalcy in our lives. There are people who believe they wash their hands by following the rules well and point their fingers at those who let their masks slide below their noses while shopping. Sports teams that have suspended activities until next spring are pointing their fingers at other teams who are beginning to

*practice with different precautions. Not all schools are making the same decisions about returning to school, yet they say that they are doing **everything** possible to keep students and staff safe. How can you do everything right? And Jesus is quick where the Pharisees have failed. And as churches make the decision to begin "in building" worship it is hard to know if the decisions made today are the right decisions tomorrow. We do so knowing full well that we won't do everything right. There always is a place to point fingers when it comes to the law.*

This is why Jesus gets snarky with the Pharisees. Jesus didn't come down from heaven to be a better teacher of the law than Moses. Jesus didn't leave his throne on high to teach courses in obedience. Jesus became flesh to deliver mercy to the disobedient. As Paul recorded in Romans 11 for today, "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." And the Canaanite woman that came to Jesus was deeply imprisoned and Jesus acted as if he was going to leave her that way. I suspect that the Pharisees may have watched on and might have been impressed with Jesus who ignored the requests of this begging female foreigner. The Pharisees maybe thought Jesus was catching on to what they were teaching by holding someone accountable to the law as they had pointed at his disciples who didn't wash their hands before they ate. Jesus didn't deny that washing hands was a good practice for his disciples. It could prevent them from getting sick. But proper washing of hands turned into a practice that the Pharisees thought moved them higher on the ladder of righteousness. And the higher you think you are on the ladder of righteousness it seems easier for you to see what others in your opinion are doing wrong. The Pharisees believed that proper hand washing was one of the keys that could help unlock the prison doors of this life and opened the doors to heaven to them.

The Canaanite woman that came to Jesus had no keys to the kingdom of heaven. She didn't boast of anything she could do well like washing hands or being a good mother or a good wife. All this woman had was a loud voice and faith that Jesus would help her. And with that loud voice she shouted at Jesus to have mercy on her for the sake of her demon possessed daughter. In spite of the woman's loud persistent shouting, it seems that Jesus doesn't hear her. Jesus who can do all things by simply speaking, is silent. Jesus doesn't even look her way. Her shouting persists to the point of annoying Jesus' disciples so much that they ask Jesus to speak up and send her away. You might think that this woman would turn from Jesus and go away when still ignoring her but speaks to his disciples "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." In spite of hearing and being reminded that she was an outsider she does not go away. Instead, she came still closer to Jesus. We are told that she knelt before Jesus just as this week's bulletin cover depicts her doing. Then just as Peter said, "Lord Save Me" as he began to sink in the Sea of Galilee, she pleaded "Lord, help me." But even then, instead of lifting her up as he did Peter, he continues to ignore her but telling his disciples that it wouldn't be fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." This woman couldn't get much lower, but she didn't crawl away from Jesus. She persists because she had heard that Jesus could do for her daughter where everyone else had failed. From her begging posture, the woman agrees with Jesus that she is nothing but a dog but reminds Jesus that even dogs eat crumbs from their master's table.

With these final words of desperation, Jesus' ears were opened, and his attention was directed to the woman kneeling at his feet. Jesus looked down at her and now spoke only to her and said, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish. Then her daughter was healed instantly.

Faith does not look like a picture of someone attempting to elevate themselves over another by pointing out what they are doing better than someone else like the Pharisees who took offense at the words Jesus said. Faith is best demonstrated in a picture such as the desperate Canaanite woman begging at the feet of Jesus who has nothing to give in exchange for the abundant blessings only Jesus can bestow. It may be hard for us to put ourselves in the place of this outcast woman whom Jesus hides his blessings from. It is easier for us to imagine that we have something in our hearts that Jesus would like to have exchange for his blessings.

Indeed, you and I are like the Canaanite woman who has come to Jesus asking for something we don't deserve. Nothing pleases our Lord Jesus more than to have a sinner hold him accountable to his word to receive a blessing. Jesus hears our pleas for mercy and responds to us the same as he did to the Canaanite woman, "Great is your faith" and it will be done for you as you wish". Amen.