

“A DOGGED FAITH”

Matthew 15:21-28

Over the years I have observed that when we gather in church to worship God that some children assume that the correct answer to any question asked during the children’s story must be either God or Jesus. I am reminded of the story of the children’s director who one Sunday talks to the children about the beauty of the fall season. In speaking to the children, she asks, *“What is brown and scampers around your yard and is furry and stores nuts for the winter?”* After a brief pause, a little girl raises her hand and answers, *“It sure sounds like a squirrel, but because this is church, I know the answer has to be Jesus.”* Because the scripture we heard a few moments ago is from the New Testament book of Matthew, we assume we are familiar with the Jesus portrayed there, but we do not recognize this Jesus. We are thrown by the fact that the main character in this account does not talk or act like we expect Jesus to talk or act. In this scriptural story we do not find a Jesus who is ready to help a person in need as is our usual image of him. In fact, one preacher suggested that if she had been Jesus’ public relations director she would have done her best to make sure this story would not have been preserved in the scriptures because it does not portray Jesus in a very positive light.

Here we find Jesus near the coastal cities of Tyre and Sidon, north of Palestine. These two cities are located in the present-day country of Lebanon. Commentators note this is the only occasion recorded in the scriptures in which we find Jesus outside the Jewish territory. This is Gentile country. Possibly feeling the need to get away from the hostilities of the Jewish leaders, as well as the crowds which seem to follow him everywhere, Jesus goes to Phoenicia. I noted a couple Sunday’s ago that the story of Jesus feeding the multitude with minimal provisions begins with the suggestion that Jesus crosses the lake by boat in an effort to get away from the crowds and be by himself for some time of solitude and prayer. Since that effort did not work, Jesus takes more desperate action and leaves the country.

Even here Jesus does not find the solitude he is seeking. An unnamed woman approaches him. We know two things about this woman. The first is that she is from that

territory. Mark calls her a Gentile born in Phoenicia. Matthew refers to her as a Canaanite. The point is, she is not Jewish. Second, the woman reveals she has a daughter who is very sick. According to first century medical understanding, the girl is believed to be possessed by a demon. Out of concern for her daughter, the mother seeks Jesus' help. She cries out, "*Son of David! Have mercy on me! My daughter has a demon and is in a terrible condition.*" Even though she is not a Jew, referring to Jesus as "*son of David*" indicates she has some knowledge and respect for the Jewish faith.

What is different about this incident is to note the way Jesus responds—or fails to respond—to the woman when she asks for his help. Jesus at first responds to the woman's cry for help with silence. He rudely does not say a word, but ignores her. Psychologists suggest the most demoralizing way any of us can respond to another person is to make no response. You see, an angry or hostile retort at least acknowledges the person's existence, while to ignore a person writes him or her off as nonexistent or not worth a response. Jesus' rudeness toward the Canaanite woman is then compounded by rejection from Jesus' disciples. She is seen by them as an irritation, and so they encourage Jesus to send her away. They argue the commotion she is creating with her shouting is a distraction. When Jesus finally speaks, he additionally rebuffs the woman. He reminds the woman that he was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Remember, this woman is a Canaanite—a Gentile—a foreigner to the group Jesus has come to save. Jesus suggests that because she is not Jewish she has no right to his healing powers.

Yet the woman, desperately concerned about her sick daughter, is persistent. She falls at Jesus' feet and pleads, "*Help me, Lord!*" Jesus adds insult to injury by saying to the woman, "*It isn't right to take a child's food and throw it to the dogs.*" In other words, it is not proper to give Jewish things—like a healing blessing—to Gentiles. Do we hear Jesus correctly? Did he really call the woman a "*dog*"? Even to this day, we refer to persons whom we consider at the bottom of society as a "*dog*." The encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is a contentious one. A little review: Jesus at first ignores her (*he does not say a word*), then dismisses her ("*I*

have been sent only to the people of Israel”) and then insults her (“It is not right to throw the children’s food to the dogs”).

Interestingly, the woman masterfully turns Jesus’ metaphor about giving a child’s food to dogs to her advantage. The woman reminds Jesus that, “*Even the dogs eat the leftovers which fall from their master’s table.*” In Jesus’ day, dogs were often scavengers for food, either under their master’s table or in the streets around garbage heaps. She argues that she would be willing to accept even the leftovers—the scraps of grace that are intended for his own people. Impressed with her argument, Jesus’ view of the Canaanite woman changes. Jesus comes around and gives her the gift of healing the woman so desperately wants for her daughter. We might ask, “*What changed Jesus’ attitude toward the woman? What quality won him over to her?*” I believe we find the answer in Jesus’ response to the woman. He says, “*You are a woman of great faith! What you want will be done for you.*” The scripture goes on to note that at that very moment her daughter is healed. Jesus recognizes her as a woman of great faith. In this story faith seems to be defined as *persistence*, not giving up, but being relentless. In a clever play on words, the woman who is called a “*dog*” is commended by Jesus for being “*dogged*” in her pursuit of what she wanted. The dictionary defines “*dogged*” as “*stubborn determination.*” Despite the obstacles put in her way, she keeps coming back again and again. Faith, you see, is to persistently hold on to the promise of God’s faithfulness, even when the circumstances we face seem to deny it. It is such a persistent faith which makes us acceptable before God.

One of the “*Chicken Soup for the Soul*” books (“*Chicken Soup for the Surviving Soul,*” page 51) includes the story of Winston Churchill giving the commencement address at Oxford University. He arrives with his usual props of a cigar, cane and top hat which accompanied the British Prime Minister everywhere he went. As Churchill approaches the podium, he removes his cigar and carefully places the top hat on the podium. He gazes at his waiting audience. Then Churchill shouts, “*Never give up!*” Several seconds pass before he rises to his toes and repeats, “*Never give up!*” The noted statesman repeats this single phrase several times. Then he gathers his hat and cigar and returns to his seat. His commencement address is finished.

While this is a dynamic story, which you may have heard before, the best I can determine is that it has been embellished for effect. I did an internet search and discovered that on October 29, 1941, Winston Churchill spoke to the students—not at Oxford University—but at the exclusive Harrow School which he had attended as a boy. As part of a longer speech—not the entire speech—Churchill did say to the students, *“Never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force; never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy.”* Whatever the setting or correct text of this speech, there is no doubt that Winston Churchill’s persistence was instrumental in successfully defending England from the spread of the Nazis during World War II.

The same quality can be seen in the Canaanite woman in our scripture. After first being rebuffed by Jesus, she persistently repeated her plea that he heal her sick daughter. The example of the Canaanite woman is an important one when we become discouraged and maybe even question God’s faithfulness in the face of difficult circumstances. When we face challenges in life we may doubt God’s goodness or wonder if God has forsaken or deserted us. Again, the characteristic which Jesus appreciates in the Canaanite woman is that she does not give up, but with persistent faith hangs on to the story of God’s faithfulness.

In his commencement address at Syracuse University several years ago (1998), Robert Fulghum, writer and Unitarian Universalist minister, reminds the graduates of the lesson of the nursery rhyme, *“The Itsy-Bitsy Spider.”* You probably remember the words, maybe even the tune and hand motions from your childhood. I do. I invite you to join me.

“The itsy-bitsy spider went up the water spout.

Down came the rain and washed the spider out.

Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.

The itsy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.”

Fulghum goes on to remind the audience that to look up a waterspout, one finds it a dark and scary place, although there is light at the far end. This nursery rhyme acknowledges that disaster

occurs—the rain comes and washes the spider out. But the lyric does not end there, and neither does it say the spider goes off to do something safer and easier. Instead, “*the itzy-bitsy spider went up the spout again.*” This is the persistence which Jesus finds appealing in the Canaanite woman. Yes, when we get knocked down, when there is a lot of rain in our lives, when we are facing overwhelming obstacles, our persistent faith means picking ourselves up and going back into that dark spout again. ***This is what living by faith is all about—to persistently hold on to the promise of God’s faithfulness, even when the circumstances we face seem to deny it.***

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August 30, 2020