

Sermon: Canaanite woman

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Matthew 15:21-28

St Aidan's Episcopal Church, 20 August 2023

The gospel lesson we just heard is one of my favorites. It brings to mind for me Jesus' essential humanity and his compassion for others. This woman, desperate to save her daughter, comes to Jesus for help, only to be turned away first by his disciples and then by Jesus himself, who uses rather insulting language. She persists and finally he recognizes her faith and heals the girl.

The story has several unusual features that make it different from other healing stories in the gospels. First, it concerns the healing of a non-Jew. The same story appears in Mark, although Mark calls the woman a Syro-Phoenician – so basically Greek. Matthew calls her a Canaanite – an indigenous woman. In either case, she is clearly not part of the Jewish community. I think there's only one other gospel story about healing a foreigner, and that's the story of the Centurion's servant, in Luke's gospel.

Second, in the story Jesus has a conversation with a woman. We know that Jesus had women among his followers and seemed to be close to several, but it would be rare for a rabbi to have a conversation with a woman he didn't know. The only similar story I can think of is Jesus' long dialogue with a Samaritan woman in John's gospel.

Third, Jesus seems to change his mind as a result of his interaction. He makes it clear that his mission is to Jews, not gentiles, yet he finally decides to make an exception. Matthew may be hinting that continued opposition to Jesus' message by Jews was persuading him to look further afield, to gentiles.

Ultimately, this is a story about faith. Consider how the woman demonstrates her faith: she ventures into hostile territory, with no real expectation that anyone will help her. She pushes past the disciples, who are eager to make her go away. She doesn't give up when she's rejected by Jesus. She just continues to persist.

She demonstrates risk-taking, courage, and determination. Most importantly, she takes action to fulfill a deeply felt need.

I don't think faith and belief are the same thing. When we say we believe in something, we're saying we accept in our minds a particular idea or set of facts. Faith is an activity, taking action to pursue a goal, even when the outcome is unclear, even when it means overcoming obstacles.

Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews lays this out really well. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." So it's about things we can't be sure of. Hebrews talks of the faith of the heroes of the Hebrew Scriptures, who demonstrated their faith by striving to do what God asked. Abraham "by faith" set off on a journey even though he didn't know where he was going or how to get there. Moses "by

faith” chose to leave his comfortable position in Pharaoh's court to take on the difficult challenge of leading his people out of Egypt, again, not knowing how he would do this.

My own experience is that when I have faced an uncertain path or a difficult challenge, I haven't always pushed ahead; sometimes it has just seemed too hard. But when I have pushed ahead to pursue a path that I thought God was calling me to, even when it hasn't worked out as I expected, it has brought blessings. And I have usually found the right way forward in the end.

Faith is not blind acceptance of whatever happens, a sense that if things don't work out, it must be what God wants. Neither is faith just passive wishing for something you want, in the hopes that it will fall into your lap. It involves risk-taking, courage, and persistence.

I don't know a lot about St Aidan's, though Mother Ragan told me this was a wonderful congregation. But I know you're in a time of transition, and I know that can be exciting and hopeful, but also full of anxiety and doubt.

We find the right way forward by setting off, by taking action, even when we don't know exactly where we're going or how to do what we want to do. We exercise faith by pushing forward, and it's in action that we discover God's promise for us.