

## **Sermon Notes - August 16, 2020**

### **“Crossing Barriers to be Heard”**

Matthew 15:21-28

In the scripture today, we have a lesson of somebody who has great faith. I want you to realize there are only two places in the gospels at which Jesus acknowledged someone as having great faith. The first one was in Matthew and Luke’s gospel where the Roman Centurion came to Jesus and asked for the healing of his servant. He said, “My servant is paralyzed and suffering terribly, Lord.” Jesus said, “I’ll go to your home and heal him.” The Centurion said, “No, Lord. I am not worthy for you to come under my roof. I am a commander of many people (of soldiers) and when I say ‘come’ to the one, he comes. When I said ‘go’, he goes. When I say, ‘do’, he does. If you’ll just say the word, my servant will be healed.” Jesus said, “I have not seen greater faith in all of Israel.” The second time Jesus talks about great faith is in our gospel lesson today about the Canaanite woman. At the end of the story, Jesus says, “Great is your faith and your request is granted.” Her daughter was healed.

What made her faith so great? I want you to think of several things: 1. She crossed cultural and racial barriers. She went against the social protocol of her day. 2. She was persistent. She was one who refused to give up. Have you ever met anybody like that? 3. She was humble. She realized that she wasn’t a Jew. She didn’t deserve God’s intervention. She thought, “I am unworthy. The only blessing that I’m entitled to is pleading for God’s mercy and grace.” And that’s what she did. She put aside her pride and prejudice and asked for God’s mercy - and God healed her.

What kind of boundaries did she cross? - Culturally and racially. She was a Canaanite woman. Now, what you need to remember is that Jesus has been in Jewish territory. He’s left Galilee and is now in Gentile territory. He’s in the home of some of the Canaanites. Do you remember in your Bible history in the Old Testament, in which Moses led the Israelites into the Promised Land? They went into the land of Canaan and the Canaanites and Israelites were fighting against one another. They were bitter enemies. Here is Jesus in the midst of Gentile territory where the Canaanites lived and were bitter enemies of the Jews. Here is a woman who is crossing the boundaries to go to Jesus, a Jewish Rabbi, to ask for the healing of her daughter. She’s crossed cultural and racial boundaries

- but, not only that - she's crossed social protocols. In that day, women were considered just an object or a piece of property. They were not to talk in public, even to their husband. It was even more so that you didn't talk across racial lines. Here she is crossing all these boundaries to beg for Jesus to heal her daughter. She had to be desperate, didn't she?

She, also, was persistent. She refused to give up. I want you to notice that she said, "Lord, help me." She first told him, "My daughter is suffering. Lord, son of David, have mercy on me. Heal my daughter. She is hurting badly from demon possession." At first, Jesus ignored her - did you notice that? That is totally unlike Jesus' character. He is so sensitive to the needs of others and compassionate, but here, he ignores her. Look at what the disciples did... they said, "Lord, send her away. She's bothering us. She's crying out after us." Isn't it interesting that Jesus' disciples were so uncompassionate and insensitive to the needs of people? After all the time they had been around Jesus, they had not learned more sensitivity and compassion. "Send her away." This is not the first time they had done that. Remember, there were other times - when the women brought their children to Jesus and asked him to bless them. The disciples said, "Get away. Jesus doesn't have time for you." Or you remember the feeding of the 5,000? Jesus had preached and healed people out in the wilderness all day. It got dark and the disciples said, "Lord, send them away so they can go into the villages and get something to eat." Jesus said, "No. You feed them." The disciples were constantly sending people away. They didn't want to be interrupted. They didn't want to be inconvenienced. At first, it seems like Jesus is ignoring her and the disciples just wanted her to go away.

Most scholars would tend to think that Jesus wanted to instruct the disciples; he wanted to stretch their faith. ***What I want you to realize is that she kept asking, even when God was silent.*** Have you ever prayed for something so long and you said, "Lord, you just have deaf ears. God, you're not hearing me. God, I'm praying to you daily, moment by moment. Lord, why are you not answering me?" ***I think God was wanting to stretch her faith and teach her something - as well as the disciples.*** Jesus went on and he did respond to her. He said, "I've only been sent to the lost sheep of Israel." Why would Jesus say such a thing? It almost sounded condescending. Here was this Canaanite woman coming to him, humbling herself before him, and he said, "I've only been sent to the Jews." She did not stop; she persisted. She said, "Lord, help

me.” Jesus responded, “It’s not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to the dogs.” Keep in mind that it may have been talking about the children being the Jews and the dogs being Gentiles because Jews and Gentiles didn’t get along and they hated one another. Jews would often use a nickname for the Gentiles and call them “dogs” – wild scavenger dogs. But, the Greek word in this translation is “puppies,” it meant like a household pet. You know how children often sit at the table and accidentally drop off food or intentionally give food to the dogs under the table? We think that’s more of what Jesus was doing here. Maybe he even had a twinkle in his eye or a smile on his face when he said that to her – because evidently she wasn’t willing to stop pleading with him to heal her daughter. She said, “Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the scraps from the Master’s table.” And Jesus said, “Great is your faith.” She was willing to be persistent and keep asking for God to heal her daughter. Have you ever known anybody who was persistent to get what they wanted?

I heard a cute story that the late Paul Harvey once told. He said this little three-year-old boy went into the grocery store with his mother one Saturday to get groceries. She put him in the cart, but before they went into the store, she said, “Now, don’t you ask for any chocolate chip cookies. You cannot have any today.” Well, what do you think happened as soon as they went down the cookie aisle? “Mom! Mom! I want some cookies!” And she said, “I’ve already told you - no cookies today.” They went around several other aisles and the mother had to go back down the cookie aisle where the flour and sugar were. The little boy said, “Mom, I want some chocolate chip cookies.” She said, “No, son. I’ve already told you - no cookies today.” They finally got to the check-out line and the little boy said (in his loudest voice), “Mom, I want some cookies.” Two or three of the people around him went and got that boy some chocolate chip cookies and when he went out that day, he had three boxes of cookies. He was persistent and determined.

I heard another story – a true story – that happened. It was on 60 Minutes or one of those programs on the TV about this older woman who had a pot-bellied pig as a pet. She had a little door at the back of the kitchen where the little pig could go in and out of the house. This older lady lived by herself and her children were not nearby. One day, she had a heart attack and fell down in the kitchen on the floor – passed out. That little pig was so sensitive to her that she went looking for help. She

scooted out that back kitchen door and went to the highway. She got out in the middle of the road hoping that somebody would stop, I guess. She kept going back and forth from the kitchen to the road. Everybody was driving around that pig. This one man noticed that it was a pot-bellied pig and he knew that it was a pet. (The pig had a little scarf around her neck where the lady had dressed it up.) The man stopped and when he did, the pig grabbed a hold of his pants leg, almost trying to pull the man back with her. The man ignored the pig and started to get back into his car. The pig grabbed his pants leg again. The pig would start back to the house and the man would start to get into his car again. The pig would come back and grab his pants leg. Three times that pig grabbed on his leg and the man finally decided to follow the pig. He followed it down the street and to the house. He saw the little pig go into the little door at the back of the house and thought, "What am I supposed to do here? What is this pig trying to tell me?" He looked through the window, saw the woman lying on the kitchen floor, and called 9-1-1 on his cellphone. They got there; told the man that the woman had a heart attack and said if they would have been 5-minutes later, she would have probably died. That pig's persistence ended up saving her. The TV program was titled, "Pig rescues woman."

This Canaanite woman was persistent; she refused to give up. She was also humble. She was one who put aside her pride and prejudice as a Canaanite. There was a steep prejudice against the Jews, and yet she had to get past that to humble herself to go and ask for Jesus' help. The scriptures say that she knelt down and said, "Lord, help me." She acknowledged that God's blessings are not because of her worthiness, but because of God's mercy and grace. You know, this woman, Jesus said, had great faith. I wonder if sometimes we aren't much like the disciples - "Oh, ye of little faith" - Jesus said to Peter, James, and John. How often did he say that to them? They were out in the boat and one day, Jesus appeared - walking on the water. Peter wants to walk on the water, but he takes his eyes off of Jesus and he starts drowning. Jesus said, "Oh, ye of little faith." When they were out in the storm and Jesus was asleep, they said, "Lord, don't you care? We're drowning out here." And Jesus said, "Oh, ye of little faith." Sometimes, we are much like the disciples.

***Jesus wants us to have great faith.*** What was he trying to say in that story to us and to the disciples? I think he was trying to say two or three things: 1. *God's love and mercy is not just for the Jews - it includes the*

*Gentiles.* Thank God it is because that includes us – the non-Jews. God’s mercy and grace, his inner circle kept enlarging and he wanted to reaffirm that to the disciples – and even to this woman. 2. *I want to say something else - when you’re praying and God seems to be silent, remember that God’s silence does not mean his indifference; his delays are not always his denials. Sometimes, he is trying to stretch our faith and teach us something.*

3. *And then, I want you to hear something else: Those disciples didn’t want to be interrupted. Maybe Jesus didn’t want to be interrupted - we don’t know.* We don’t know why Jesus went that day to Gentile territory. Some scholars say he went because we wanted rest. Some say the end of his ministry was getting close and he wanted some private time with his disciples. But, what I want you to know is that Jesus, in Mark’s Gospel, had gone to a particular house and he didn’t want it to be known where he was because he wanted that private time with his disciples. And yet, this woman came in, pushing herself, asserting herself, refusing to let go until Jesus healed her daughter. They were interrupted. ***Sometimes our greatest blessings come at a time in which we experience inconvenience and interruption in life.*** There are times in our Christian lives that we will be inconvenienced to do something for someone or interrupted to do something. You will think, “Lord, I don’t have time to be bothered with that today.” ***That person may have been put in your pathway because God put them there for you - because God wanted to teach you something.***

I heard a cute story about a pastor that had a wedding one Saturday night at his church. He was almost late for the service. When he got there, there was a woman waiting for him in the parking lot. “Pastor, I just need some milk. I need some baby formula for my baby.” It’s not unusual for us to see people that come to church for help. Everybody was standing out on the steps watching people go in for the wedding and they see the pastor, hear what’s going on, and are waiting to see what he’s going to do. He said, “Ma’am, the church office is closed. It’s open Monday through Friday. If you’ll come back on Monday, we’ll give you some milk.” He saw some people watching him. He was about to be late. He thought, “Do I slow down this wedding and take care of this need or what do I do?” Finally, he pulled some money out of his pocket and asked one of the ushers if they would go to the store and get some baby formula for this woman. All of a sudden, the whole wedding party started

applauding and saying “Good job, Pastor.” When that woman got the formula, she sat down on the steps and fed that baby immediately. Sometimes we are inconvenienced and interrupted because God wants to remind us about his compassion and his love for people. People matter over things.

Know that sometimes your interruptions and inconveniences are times that God is trying to instruct us and to teach us something about him, his love, his generosity, his compassion – and he wants us to show it to others. So, keep praying even when God is silent – it may be that God is trying to stretch our faith. His silence doesn’t always mean indifference or denial. Remember that Jesus reaffirmed his ministry that God’s inner circle enlarges to all people – not just to Jews – but even to us Gentiles.

I pray that God will help us to be sensitive to the inconveniences and interruptions in life – and that you won’t give up praying. **If you keep praying for something and think it falls on deaf ears and God’s not listening to you, don’t give up. Be persistent.** And then I pray that God will help us to do the hard and holy work of doing justice and inequality for all people – and love all people – because God does. May God bless us. Amen.