

Pentecost 11 Matthew 15 “Great Faith” August 16 2020

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing unto You, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen!

Great faith, we wonder what that is; we wonder if we could have it.

Shortly before this in Matthew’s narrative, Jesus has been in a dispute with the Pharisees about clean and unclean, kosher and Sabbath keeping. “Why don’t your disciples do the ceremonial washing before they eat?” they ask Jesus.

“It is not what goes into the mouth that makes one unclean,” asserts Jesus, “but what comes out.”

Listen to what comes out of this woman’s mouth. Is it clean or unclean? Jesus calls it great faith.

Jesus says, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs. I came for the lost sheep of Israel.” At this point all the Jewish types, including the disciples, are nodding in agreement. This is the logic of their world. God has a chosen people, and while there can be righteous gentiles, this woman is clearly not one of them. She is a dog.

But Jesus already knows this woman. He has already found this treasure. He is just claiming what his life’s blood is about to buy. And she responds with this marvelously witty comeback: “Yes, for the dogs eat of the crumbs, the ones that fall from their master’s table.”

All I want is a crumb, she says, a little piece of bread that has fallen from the master’s table. Just a crumb! She has not disappointed Jesus, indeed she has evidenced a faith he has found sorely lacking in his fellow Jews. He smiles at her and gives her what her heart yearns for. And gives the disciples an important lesson as He does. Her faith is great.

Remember last week when Jesus was walking on the water and Peter started to sink? Do you remember what Jesus said to him? “O you of little faith, why did you doubt?” Remember what Jesus said to the disciples when they could not cast the demon out of the little boy, “if you have faith like a grain of mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, ‘Move from here to there,’ and it will move, and nothing will be impossible for you.”

What makes this woman's faith so great and what makes Peter's so little? Was it because this woman was praying for the life of her very daughter? But this woman knows who Jesus is; she knows that Jesus can help her daughter. She came from the same regions as the crowds that pressed Jesus in such numbers as He was healing the sick along the shore of the sea of Galilee that He had to set out in a boat. She has learned the lesson of who He is and what He can do.

What makes our faith great and what makes it small? Faith small as a mustard seed can move a mountain. It is God who works through faith and He has all the power that it needs, but still, there is an advantage, a good thing to having a strong faith. What makes it strong? Is it not that the woman holds Jesus to his own words. She listens to what He says and "catches" Him in his own words. "Yes, I am a dog, I know it, but the dogs do get the crumbs that fall from the table."

How shall we catch our Lord in His word? First of all, that means listening very closely to what He says and taking Him at that word. But then it means having the boldness and the confidence to hold Him to it. It means kneeling at that rail and holding up that wafer and saying to God – "You promised! You promised that when I eat this my sins are forgiven. You promised that when I eat this you come to me and make me one with you and all your people. You promised to dwell in my life and make it more like your life. You promised!" You promised that whoever confesses his sins, God would forgive His sins and cleanse him from all unrighteousness. God loves it when we hold Him to his promises.

Faith means walking out the doors of our church and believing Him when He says He goes with us and works through us for the salvation of our neighbor and our friends and our family. And so that means opening our mouths and giving God a few words to work with inside those relationships. Believing His promise that He loved the world in this way, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.

God is the ultimate Tetris player. He flips us around and finds us the perfect spot in his kingdom, gives us a name that is everlasting. He can even find room in there for a Canaanite woman with a demoniac daughter. Of course, we might wonder if there is a spot for us in this kingdom of God, really. After all, we perhaps have fooled the pastor, even our own family, but deep inside we know what is in there and we don't like it. God knows it too and we are very afraid of that truth.

But we can be sure of this. There is no sin in that blackened heart of ours which is bigger or tougher than the shed blood of Christ. **That** blood and **that** Savior take sinners and do amazing things, including you and your sins. The Holy Spirit makes us confident, even bold in our relationship with God.

But this has a rather scandalous implication for us. We, like this woman, can trap Jesus in his own promises. He actually invites and likes us to do that. He wants us to hold Him to the promises which He made in this supper which we eat here. He promises His body and blood, given and shed will forgive our sins, strengthen us and encourage us. You can take that to the bank and cash it. Be bold with that promise.

And when we leave this place, we also are bold. Confident in the loving-kindness of God and his great mercy for sinners. We are bold to go forth from these doors into the world to which God has called us and made us witnesses. Our fears and our enemy tempt us to silence, but God has already lovingly accepted us and mercifully worked with our words in the past. Our relationship with God is not hanging on our success as witnesses, and His success as a gatherer of people is not hanging on the eloquence of our words. He can work with some pretty strange stuff. Remember, He makes odd shaped stones into his corner stone and builds us into a temple for His Spirit. We are bold witnesses whenever we count on His promises.

We are also emboldened to be risk takers in other ways. We are no longer afraid to lose. We have the ultimate safety net under us. Christians are bold and courageous because we are confident in the love of Christ. Nothing that happens in our lives can change the fact of the cross and the love of God which He has expressed therein. We can love the unlovable neighbor, we can try to mediate the impossible fight, we can forgive the unforgivable sin.

This text makes us bold even with God. Like the woman who was seemingly rebuffed, we can speak honestly and hold Him to his word. He has made amazing promises to us and loves it when we hold Him to them. He invites us to be bold with Him in this regard. God loves it when we catch him in his own promises. Hold that wafer aloft and say, "God, You promised!" Walk into that tough situation and pray, "God, You promised to be with me here. I am counting on you!"

Talk to the guy you hate and remember that Jesus prayed for the guys who hated and reviled Him from the cross. And He calls us to do the same. He smiles to see us join Him in loving in the face of hatred. Count on Him.

Jesus heals the daughter. He values her. We can count on the promises of God this way too. He has numbered the hairs of our head and is present even when a single sparrow falls to the ground. He promises to be with you and love you much more.

And that little faith that we fear is not enough. That faith that did not heal the demon-possessed boy. It still was the faith of the apostles. The same apostles who had performed miracles and healed the sick. And whatever faith, as long it clings to the Son of God, Jesus Christ who came to save us, is saving faith. You see faith is not the power, but rather the connection to the powerful God who loves us. And such a faith is great.

Feeling unworthy? Welcome to the Lord's house. Feeling downtrodden, oppressed, and afflicted? Welcome to the sanctuary of the Lord. Not sure you have enough faith to save you? Welcome to the Ark of God's Church that carries us through this fallen world, to life everlasting. Here in Word and Sacrament is the gift of saving faith.

May the love of God and the grace of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit keep you in the true faith to life everlasting. Amen!