

“Testing of Faith”

Mathew 15:21-28

Sermon for the Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, August 16, 2020

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Rifle, Colorado

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In our Gospel reading today, Jesus has an encounter with a Canaanite woman. She is not a child of Israel. She is a gentile.

The story begins with Jesus withdrawing into the region of Tyre and Sidon from Galilee. He needed to get away from Galilee for a while. Scribes and Pharisees had come from Jerusalem to investigate Jesus to try to find fault with Him, and things were getting testy. So He withdrew from there to gentile territory, where He would be safe for a while. Hence this remarkable encounter with this Canaanite woman.

There are two sides to this encounter that deserve particular attention. On the one side is the woman. The woman exhibits great faith. On the other side is Jesus. Jesus tests her faith to draw it out and to make it stronger.

The woman comes to Jesus because she is in deep need. Her daughter was being severely tormented by a demon. She heard that Jesus was in town. She had heard about Him. News traveled fast about Jesus, because of the wonderful things He had been doing.

The woman initiates this encounter. Since she exhibits faith, let's see what she does. She addresses Jesus as Lord. This is the estimation of her heart about Him. She gives herself completely into His care. She throws herself at His feet, literally. In her heart, she regards herself completely at His mercy. She looks to Him for what she needs.

Then she calls Jesus Son of David. This is remarkable. King David was king of Judah and all Israel. He was feared and respected by the people who lived in Tyre and Sidon in those days. She confesses her obedience to the Son of this King of Israel. This is a remarkable thing for a Canaanite woman from the region of Tyre and Sidon to do.

This is remarkable because it shows a couple of things that seem unexpected. First, it shows that she was familiar with and believed in the promises that God made to King David about the Messiah, the Christ and Savior. God had promised that the Messiah would be a descendant of King David (2 Sam 7). Now the Messiah has come. It is Jesus. The Canaanite woman recognized Jesus as the Messiah as a result of what she had heard about Him.

The Canaanite woman calling Jesus Son of David is also remarkable because of how it contrasts with the Scribes and Pharisees from Jerusalem (Mat. 15:1). They would not profess Jesus as David's Son even though He did so many wonderful things in their sight. But this gentile woman recognizes Him and professes faith in Him. She has believed in the Scriptures while the Scribes and Pharisees apparently did not. She recognized Him when they did not. Now she calls Him who He truly is. She pleads with Him for help.

In pleading to Jesus for help, she worships Him with the highest worship and honor. To seek help from Him is such worship. She simply says, "Have mercy on me" and "help me." She did not come to Jesus offering anything, except her need and her faith in Him that looked to Him for help. She had no ethnic or racial credentials to claim. She offered Him no money. She had no worthiness to claim. She came only in her need and in an appeal to mercy in faith.

In that empty-handedness, she has no answers. She has no control. Control has been taken from her due to her child's condition. She makes no conditions. She makes no demands.

Jesus's first response to her is no response at all. It is silence: "He did not answer her a word" (Mat. 15:23). Silence. It seems like He is ignoring her. Now the devil, the scoffing world, reason and unbelief declare in the confidence of being utterly right: "See, He does not care, at all."

What is He doing? He is testing her faith. He is seeing what it is made of. He wants to draw it out. He wants to make it stronger.

Faith persists in the silence. Faith persists in response to the scoffing and condemnation of God that comes from devil, the world, and faithless flesh. And in so doing it grows stronger.

It grows stronger as it clings to what the woman clinged to: God's promises in the Scriptures. And the Spirit works in Scripture's testimony to strengthen faith; to not give up on God and Jesus; to continue to seek and persist even when it appears that Jesus answers us not a word.

The woman exhibits this in her persistence.

The disciples point this out and just want to get rid of her. She is a nuisance to them. Make her go away. There is a twist in this. What they want is for Jesus to give her what she wants so she will go away. They want Jesus to make her daughter well to get rid of her. They are engaging in a way of getting rid of someone that appears pious, but it is not as if they really care about her and her faith.

In response to the disciples, Jesus says that He was only sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mat. 15:24). What is He saying? Here is more testing. It is a challenge to faith's persistence. Will she now be dissuaded? Will she now be offended, even by Jesus Himself?

Once again she calls Jesus Lord. Aw, she does not judge Jesus but commends herself to His care even more. And then all she does is say help me.

Jesus responds again to the woman with a challenge. "It is not good to take the bread intended for the children and give it to the little dogs" (Mat. 15:26).

But once again Jesus is testing her, to see what her faith is made of; to see what she understands.

She makes no arguments. She asserts no condemnation of Jesus. She takes no offense. She actually agrees with Him. But then she uses Jesus argument against Him, so to speak. "Yes Lord", she says. She calls Jesus Lord a third time. "But even the little dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

"I have no claims to make Lord. I know you must fulfill Your mission to Israel, because God had promised that Israel's Messiah would come to them. If God had

not fulfilled His promise to Israel by sending You, then no one, not even I a Canaanite woman, could believe in God's promises. But I will take the least bit of help you can provide for me, because Israel's Messiah is also for all people. And that least bit of help is all that I need."

How can Jesus argue with that? He exclaims: "O woman, great is your faith" (Mat. 15:28). And He gave her the relief she sought in faith. Jesus did not make such an exclamation very often.

Jesus tests faith to strengthen it. He can test it with silence. He can test it with challenges that seem contrary. But He is drawing faith out. He is seeing what we are made of. In it He is working with His promises and Spirit, to strengthen it. So let us continue in faith, even if it seems like silence is all we get from God; even if it seems like difficult and contrary challenges are all that come. Let us continue in faith like this woman Jesus encountered that day, our sister. Let us persist, believing who Jesus is and having an unyielding trust in His goodness and faithfulness. And in this faith we shall see the salvation we seek. We may have to wait for it, even for a long time, but He will deliver, whether here in this time, or there in our eternal country. Let us continue to profess Him as Lord, and continue to pray, as we seek Him in faith: "Lord, have mercy and help me."

Amen.