

+ 13th Sunday After Pentecost: August 30th, 2020 +
St Paul Lutheran, Tomah, Wisconsin
Pastor Korey Van Kampen
“Great Faith Clings to Jesus”

What reaction do you have when you see a great performer? When you see the track star sprint for 100 meters and cross the line in record time? When you see the dancers flawlessly execute their moves with elegance and grace? When you hear the singer touch all the notes with effortless precision? Sure we have our ooh’s and ahhs’s, our wonder and amazement at the things we see them do. But there’s more. There’s also a degree of inspiration there too, isn’t there? There’s a reason that interest in figure skating clubs and classes usually picks up right after the Olympics, and the same happens for several other sports. Greatness is inspiring. We see it and we say, “I want to be like that.” Do you ever have that with someone’s faith? Where you look at something in their life -- be it their peace in the midst of hardship or their calm demeanor in the face of strife or something else like that and say to yourself? “I want to be like that. I want to have great faith.” If you’ve ever wanted to have great faith, we’re going to get an inspiring picture of it as we look at today’s gospel lesson.

Matthew 15:21-28 Jesus left that place and withdrew into the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² There a Canaanite woman from that territory came and kept crying out, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David! A demon is severely tormenting my daughter!” ²³ But he did not answer her a word. His disciples came and pleaded, “Send her away, because she keeps crying out after us.” ²⁴ He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵ But she came and knelt in front of him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶ He answered her, “It is not good to take the children’s bread and throw it to their little dogs.” ²⁷ “Yes, Lord,” she said, “yet their little dogs also eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸ Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, your faith is great! It will be done for you, just as you desire.” And her daughter was healed at that very hour.

Where we find Jesus today is not in any of his typical places in Judea and Galilee. He’s gone up the Mediterranean coast to the region of Tyre and Sidon -- present day Syria and Lebanon, about 40 miles or so northwest from the Sea of Galilee. And it is here that he and his disciples encounter this Canaanite woman. She cries out to Jesus, **“Have Mercy on me Lord, Son of David!”**

What happens next is probably equally shocking. Jesus ignores her. Not even a word of acknowledgement. Not even a “wait while I take care of this other thing.” **He did not answer her a word.** Silence. But this woman was undeterred. She kept on crying out to him. Eventually the disciples plead with Jesus to send her away because she’s making so much noise. “Jesus, just help her already so she leaves us alone.” They didn’t so much want Jesus to help her as they wanted the noise to stop. To this, Jesus replies, with this woman in earshot, **“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,”** a not-so-subtle hint in her direction. Unfazed, she still won’t go away. Now she kneels before him and says, **“Help me.”** To this, Jesus bluntly replies, **“it is not right to take the children’s food and toss it to their dogs.”** Whoa, right? Did he really just call her a dog? Yes, yes he did. Now, you can soften what Jesus says by rightly pointing out that the word for dog here probably refers to

more of a household pet rather than the mangy, stray dogs you might find on the street. But you know what? A dog is a dog. Doesn't really matter if it's a pet or a stray.

You look at all this, and doesn't it seem out of character for Jesus? Usually he helps people right away when they come to him. Only on rare occasions does he make a person wait. Even more than that, you never see him offering these kinds of put-offs and put-downs to anyone else. He's even helped a Roman centurion and several Samaritans, so it's not that he would only help his fellow Jews. So what's going on here? Given that this is so out of character for Jesus, there has to be a good reason for it. To say these kinds of things to this woman, he has to know something about her that we don't know. So what is it? The answer becomes clear in the woman's response: When Jesus called her a dog, this is how she replied: **"Yes, Lord, for even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."** She doesn't get angry at Jesus and storm off, no, she agrees with him, "yes, Lord." And then what she says in effect is, "I may be a dog, but it is better to be a dog at your table than to be a king anywhere else. There is more than enough of your goodness to go around." And it's there that Jesus stops. He immediately says to her, **"Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And at that moment her daughter was healed.**

Now it becomes a little clearer why Jesus was treating her the way that he was. Remember there's something about Jesus that is different from us. We can't see into people's hearts. But he can. He could see into her heart and know what kind of faith was there -- the kind of faith that would go unnoticed unless it was thoroughly and publicly put to the test. So Jesus put these hard responses to her because he knew that this great faith was in her heart, and he wanted to give her the opportunity to put this great faith on display for everyone to see -- both his disciples then and today, so that we could see it and be inspired to our own great faith. He could have just healed her daughter and sent her on her way, but now we get to see what great faith looks like.

So then, what is it about her faith that made it great? Yes, she knew who Jesus was. But there's more to it than just that. Think for a moment about how you might have responded if Jesus spoke to you the way he did to her -- meeting your urgent requests for help first with silence, then a put-off, then a veiled put-down. Would you have given up? Gotten angry? Stormed away? Given him a bad google review? Given up hope of help? All these types of things were certainly on her mind too. But one thing stood stronger than all of that. She didn't give up because she was utterly convinced that Jesus is good. She knew that a good Savior doesn't ignore pleas for help without cause. That a good Savior doesn't put off without reason. A good Savior doesn't just cast insults at people who ask for help. Her tenacious faith clung to Jesus' goodness even when his actions toward her seemed to show otherwise. Her confidence in Jesus' goodness convinced her that all she needed to do was keep asking and Jesus would meet her need. Great faith is absolutely certain that Jesus is good and will not let go of that fact.

And if there's ever a time that we need great faith like hers, it is now. I'll speak for myself. I'm worn out. I'm tired from a lot of things. I want this pandemic to be over. I'm tired of not really being comfortable going out for dinner with my wife. I'm tired of zoom meetings. I'm tired of preaching to a $\frac{2}{3}$ - $\frac{3}{4}$ empty church and windshields. I'm tired of having to wear a mask. I'm tired of seeing wedges driven into God's people by the effects of the pandemic and its politicization by both sides of the aisle. I'm tired of seeing our society

fight about every issue. I'm tired of our unwillingness to walk a mile in someone else's shoes. I'm tired of it all, and I want it all to be done. In addition to that, I so badly want this school year to go well, not just for my kids' sakes, but also for mine as a parent, and for all teachers and school workers and employees. They've all worked so hard to get to this point and I want them to be able to enjoy the fruit of their hard work.

What is it that you're wanting after? Maybe you want some of the same things that I do? Maybe it's just to have all our kids and families stay safe and healthy and to never have to quarantine? Maybe its full seasons of sports and activities? Maybe it's not having to jump back into virtual schooling or anything like that? Maybe it's something simple like handshakes or hugs? Maybe it's getting through a tough situation? Relief from a hardship? Time to pass and heal some wounds? A break from struggles and pain? I'm sure you've prayed about some or many of these things. I know that I have. Not to be the bearer of bad news or the dreamcrusher, but the odds that God will give all that you ask on the timeline that you expect and hope for are slim at best. He might make you wait in silence. He might appear to help other people before he helps you. At times, you might find his answers to your prayers insulting in some form. What are we going to do when that happens? Give up? Get angry? Turn away from him?

Those thoughts are going to be there. What's at the root of them? Doubt -- doubt that God really is good. Doubt that he really cares. Doubt that he loves you and has in mind only what is good for you. The temptation here isn't that much different than what Satan lobbed at Eve in the garden, "If God really is good, he wouldn't hold out on you. He wouldn't forbid that tree." Or in our case, "If God really is good, he wouldn't hold out on you. He'd give you what you're asking for." To have great faith, this kind of doubt and temptation needs to be overcome. To have great faith, we have to be absolutely convinced of his goodness.

Thankfully that's why Jesus came -- to give us the ultimate proof of his goodness so that all of our temptations to doubt can be overcome. And the ultimate proof of his goodness happens at the cross. That's how we see and know that he is good. Jesus didn't have to be there. He chose it. Even more than that, just like Jesus saw into this woman's heart and saw her faith there, he also sees and knows everything about us -- all the unpleasant, angry, dirty, spiteful thoughts that run through our heads -- all our inner murmurings and complaints about himself and others, all our sin and all our shame, all the times we doubted God's goodness, and he still chose to be there in your place and in mine. He chose to be there so that what we deserved for our sin would fall on him instead of on us. He chose to die under our sin so that we might live. And because he did this, your sins are forgiven. Your doubt about his goodness is wiped away forever. Your guilt and your shame are obliterated -- in fact what caused it never happened. And Jesus did all of this for you. So here's the thing: can the Savior who knows you inside out and still loves and lays down his life for you - how can that savior be anything other than good?

The theme that our school here at St. Paul has chosen for the year is "fix your eyes on Jesus." I can't think of a better theme and encouragement for these times than that. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Look to Jesus and his cross and there you have all that you need for great faith. Great faith clings to Jesus and his goodness no matter what else is going on. I can't promise you that this school year will go great. I can't promise that the pandemic will be over soon and we can start living again. I can't promise that whatever struggle or

challenge you're dealing with will instantly become light and easy or gone altogether. But I can promise you that no matter what happens, God is good. The cross proves it.

So as we go into this school year wherever you are in life -- a student, a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a volunteer, a helper, or anything else, let's go into it together -- with great faith that clings to Jesus. Amen!