

Pentecost XIV
Proper 15: Year A
Matthew 15:21-28
August 17, 2008

I really like this Syro-Phonician woman that is in today's Gospel! She knows what she wants...she knows who Jesus is...and she knows He can give her what she wants...and she is determined to get it! My kind of gal... reminds me a lot of me!

And isn't this a bit of a contract from last week's Gospel? Last week Peter, one of the Apostles, sees Jesus walking on the water and says "Lord *if* it is you tell me to come to you on the water." No "ifs" with this Syro-Phonician woman...she knows who He is as she calls him "O Lord, Son of David."

Back to Peter...he isn't so sure of this walking on water stuff and then a wind comes up and he begins to sink and cry out "Lord, save me." Now that he is in distress, you notice there are no "if's!" And as Jesus saves him, Jesus says to him "O you of little faith, why did you doubt?"

However, at the end of the Gospel today what does Jesus say to the Syro-Phonician woman?...He says "O woman, great is your faith!" See why I like the story so much!?!

This morning I would like to take a few minutes to look at this woman and see the traits in her which all of us should admire.

At first glance, this Gospel reading does not put Jesus in the very best light. Before this story Jesus was in Gennesaret which was on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. He is now moving to Tyre and Sidon which are 25 and 50 miles north of Galilee on the Mediterranean Shore...this is Gentile country. Except for when he was carried into Egypt as a baby, this is the first time that we know of Jesus going outside the borders of Palestine. As He is making this trip a Canaanite woman approaches him and cries out to Jesus...and the Greek word used here is actually more like a scream or a shriek...she cries out to Jesus to have mercy on her. She knows who he is so she calls him "Lord" and "Son of David" which are both terms that a Jew might use for the Messiah.

She wants her daughter healed because her daughter is tormented by demons. She has most likely heard that Jesus is good at exorcising demons...and she loves her daughter...and although a pagan, she is willing to do what it takes for her child. Even talk to this Jesus person who is working miracles.

Then comes the part where Jesus doesn't look too good...he simply ignores her. This seems out of character for our Lord. Since Jesus ignores her, the disciples decide to do the same and they ask Jesus to send her away. Please note, they did not address Jesus as "Lord." His answer to them (as he still hasn't addressed her) is that he had been sent "to save the sheep of the house of Israel"...Jesus has a whole nation to be saved and he must keep focused. Now remember, this Gospel is written by Matthew, a Jew, who

has the mindset that the Gospel message belongs to Israel. And, it should also be noted that Jesus' ministry has been mainly to the Jews...He is giving the Israelites every chance to accept Him and the Kingdom of God that was promised to them. Of course after the Resurrection the doors will be wide open to the Gentiles but at this point in his ministry his focus is the Israelites.

However, our Canaanite lady is not to be dismissed. Her daughter needs help, so once again she calls him "Lord" she begs him "help me" and this time she kneels before him. The Greek word here is actually more than just "kneel" is literally means to prostrate oneself in homage and can be translated as "worship."

Certainly her respect for the Lord is something that we can greatly admire.

We can also admire her faith and perseverance. Let's face it, this woman started out with a number of strikes against her before she ever approached Jesus! First of all she was a Greek and therefore not one of God's covenant people.

Second, she was a woman of Canaan. If you remember from the Old Testament stories, when the people of Israel conquered the land of Canaan, God had commanded them to utterly destroy the Canaanites. However, the Israelites disobeyed God, which was not very unusual, and eventually the pagan influences of the Canaanites, that the Israelites tolerated, became their downfall. By Jesus' day,

the Jews had learned their lesson (the hard way of course) and therefore had no contact whatsoever with the Canaanites.

And finally, she was a Syro-Phoenician woman of the region of Tyre and Sidon. In the latter days of ancient Israel, before the Babylonian captivity, the people in this region became bitter enemies of Israel.

Then, when she comes to Jesus she has three more strikes against her. First, Jesus ignored her. Second, the disciples are annoyed with her and want her sent away. And for the third strike, Jesus rebukes her by telling her "It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs."

What a surprisingly strange thing for our Lord to say. But our respectful woman holds her ground even though she surely understood his meaning. The "children" were the Jews (the children of the kingdom) and the "little dogs" represented the Gentiles. Perhaps Jesus was testing her. The Jews considered the Gentiles no better than dogs. Will our woman walk away and refuse to listen anymore? No, she responds with great faith and answers "Yes, Lord (once more calling him Lord out of respect) yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their master' table."

She was saying to him that she was willing to take the crumbs of his blessing. She was keeping her place...she was not seeking the first place; the children's place but was willing to take a second place...a second blessing.

She persevered under circumstances that could have been discouraging. What is discouraging to some people, is not discouraging at all to the strong.

Finally, we can rejoice with her as she receives her request and she hears the words of Jesus “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be to you as you desire.” In this same account in the book of Mark, Jesus says “for this saying go your way; the demon has gone out of your daughter” And when she had come to her house, she found the demon gone out, and the daughter lying on the bed.”

So, what can we, here in St. Mark's Anglican Church on Sunday, August 17th in the year 2008 learn from his Gospel? I would challenge us to consider 5 lessons!

Lesson #1 – We should have respect for the Lord – He is the Lord, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the King of kings and the Lord of lords. May each of us have a totally awesome respect for Him and His Word!

Lesson #2 – We must have a humble spirit – We must always be willing to take the lower place. We need not be discouraged if we don't receive the recognition or the praise that we might deserve.
Jesus sure didn't.

Lesson #3 – We must be persistent – Look at the obstacles this woman faced...Jesus was silent to her first request, the

disciples wanted her to be sent away, and when Jesus did finally speak his words seemed to be very negative. Yet none of this deterred her or caused her to give up and walk away. May we be as persistent in our requests to God. Prayer truly changes things...that's not just a cute saying on a bumper sticker or a plaque!

Lesson #4 – Faith that is tested is richer faith – Jesus could have given her what she wanted immediately but he tested her and in the end she left with a fuller and richer faith.

Lesson #5 – Blessings flow bountifully from the Lord. God is not chintzy with His blessings...they may not always be in the form we wanted them to be, but they are always what we need them to be.

One of the things I have admired most about this church since I first came here 5 weeks ago...and by "this church" I mean all of you...in the pews...is your faith and your determination to keep on keepin' on for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, even in these difficult times...when it would be so much easier to give up...to walk away...to not be persistent like our Syro-phonician woman.

In Jeremiah 29, verse 13, God says "You will seek Me and find Me, when you search for Me with all your heart."

Let us all, this day, at St. Mark's, seek the Lord in faith.
Let us all, this day, at St. Mark's, seek the Lord in humility.

Let us all, this day, at St. Mark's, seek the Lord with all our hearts.

Let us all, this day, at St. Mark's, seek the Lord's blessing with persistence and with complete obedience to His will and His word.

Then, may we watch together with joy and anticipation, listening for His words, "Great is your faith, let it be to you as your desire!"

Amen