

LECTIONARY 20 (9 PENT.) AUGUST 14, 2011 CYCLE "A"

TITLE: JESUS SAW HER FAITH, LET HIM SEE OURS.

READINGS: Isa 56:1,6-8, Ps 67, Rom 11:1-2a, 29-32, Matt 15:[10-20] 21-28

If you remember last week's sermon, and I'm sure you remember every word, I mentioned that Ahab, King of Israel, had married Jezebel, a member of the royalty from the Northern Kingdom in order to forge peaceful relations with them. The infamous Jezebel was from Tyre in Phoenicia. In the Gospel pericope today Jesus travels with his disciples to the district of Tyre and Sidon. It is there beside the Mediterranean Sea resting and relaxing with his disciples that they encounter the Canaanite woman. As you well know, in the time of Jesus, women had very little status in Jewish society. They were considered to be the property of their husbands or their fathers. They had very few rights. In that culture and in their religious practices, men were special, women were not. It was surely not kosher for a Jewish man to interact with a strange woman, especially a Canaanite woman. She must have known this. Who did this woman think she was, crying out incessantly after Jesus!

The disciples just wanted her to leave them alone, to get lost, and to just go away. That's why they wanted Jesus to get rid of her. But she had to have been a good mother. Not giving up, she wasn't so much concerned about herself, but only her daughter. She wanted Jesus to heal her daughter at whatever cost. Why didn't Jesus just send her away as his disciples urged? First of all Jesus ignored her. But she persists! Then he tells her that he wasn't sent for the lost sheep of Israel and the food to feed them should not be wasted on the Gentiles, the non-Jews, the unbelievers who worship false gods! He even uses a very derogatory term "you dogs" a very degrading expression most likely used many times by Jews in regard to the hated Canaanite people. Remember the remark of Jesus about Lazarus who was covered with soars who sat outside the temple? "Even the dogs would come and lick his soars." Lk.16:21b. And it was wild dogs which came and would tear at those who were being crucified. Now he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Matt.15:26. But she is unflinching in her entreaty! "Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table." Wow! What humility! What persistence! The woman knelt and made her final appeal: "Lord, help me." Here is where Jesus teaches the Canaanite woman, his disciples and us a

great truth: God's grace and salvation comes to all people, Jew and Gentile alike through faith in him.

Let us look back to our first reading selection from Isaiah. It is here that we see this truth of salvation promised long before the Messiah came to earth. "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...these I will bring to my holy mountain... their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all people" Isa.56:6-7. And Paul just a few verses previous to today's reading reminds us, "For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. For, 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'" Rom.10:12-13. With Isaiah, Jesus, Paul and the disciples, it was all about faith. This reminds me of the story of the days of the circuit rider evangelists. There was a Methodist Bishop named Francis Asbury who was making a missionary ride along with a layman from his church. Suddenly they encountered some hostile Indians. After they escaped, the layman asked the bishop: "I'll bet you were feeling for your faith back there, weren't you bishop?" Asbury replied, "To tell you the truth, I was feeling for my pistol."

It was the faith of the Canaanite woman that Jesus recognized. She is described with four immortal words: "Great is your faith." And the result – her daughter is healed instantly. Her confession "Lord, Son of David" marked her great act of faith. There was no waiting, no strings attached, no other conditions; both the Canaanite woman and her daughter were saved and healed through faith in Jesus. It is interesting to note that this woman is the only person in the Gospel of Matthew, male or female, who is commended for having great faith. Others are commended for their faith, but only this woman for her GREAT faith. It is obvious to Jesus that faith was the central issue in life. For us it is the same. If Jesus can see that faith in us as he did in the Canaanite woman, then we, too, are saved! For Jesus it was not as important where you belong, whether Jew or Gentile, Greek or Roman, but to whom you belong. When the floods come and the waters rise, when the storms and earthquakes destroy and the Tsunami annihilates; in times of great need the differences that separate people become irrelevant. All that matters is our relationship with God. All that matters is God's grace and our faith.

That otherwise unknown Canaanite woman was immortalized when Jesus spoke these four words: "Great is your faith." What a gift! What a blessing! To be singled out in such a way. We should regard this woman with special interest, for she awakens in us feelings of admiration perhaps even envy, because she stands

where most of us would like to stand. What faithful Christian would not like it said of him/her, great is your faith? “Then Jesus answered her, ‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’ And her daughter was healed instantly.” Matt.15:28. **Amen.**

Pastor Barney