

"Great Is Your Faith!"

Matthew 15:21-28, Proper 15-A, Pentecost 10

Aug. 17, 2014

Many of us were shocked by the news reports this past Tuesday morning that 63 year old comedian/actor Robin Williams had died. The cause of death was said to be asphyxiation; and later on in that same day his death was ruled to be a suicide.

Here was a man who had the **great ability to make others laugh and to forget about their own problems** for a while, but who was himself woefully vexed with demons. He was said to be suffering from clinical depression and alcohol and drug abuse as a result of his own attempts to "self-medicate." Not long ago Robin Williams said in a television interview: **"COCAINE IS GOD'S WAY OF TELLING YOU THAT YOU ARE MAKING TOO MUCH MONEY!"**

When I heard this I couldn't help but think of Jesus' words, *"How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter into the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God!"* And when Jesus was talking about entering the kingdom of God he was not just talking about **one's ability to enter through the Pearly Gates into heaven** on the day one died, but also about **a person surrendering their whole present life to the rule and reign of God already now**; for the kingdom of God, as Jesus speaks about it repeatedly, is a present reality as well as a future reality! **I am glad that the disciples who heard our Lord say this then were so astonished that they asked Jesus together in unison with one voice: "Then who can be saved?"** Our Lord replied: *"With human beings this is impossible, but not with God! With God all things are possible!" (Mark 10:26-27)*

Friends as I took a close look at our Gospel lesson I was repeatedly confronted with the question: **"WHAT MAKES FOR A GREAT FAITH?"** For this is how Jesus wraps up his **rather unusual conversation with this Canaanite woman, this Gentile; this woman** whom theologically speaking, Jesus has seemingly **just put through the meat grinder!** Jesus says, *"Woman, great is your faith!"* He doesn't say, *"Woman, you have a great faith!"* No the word **"GREAT"** is placed in what we call the **emphatic position** to emphasize all the more just how great this woman's faith actually was!

What makes for a great faith? I would like to suggest to you at **least three chief ingredients** of a great faith!

I. FIRST OF ALL A GREAT FAITH REQUIRES A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF KNOWLEDGE!

From whomever she had received it, **this Canaanite woman was in possession of some profound knowledge about the God of the Old Testament; about the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that could only have been given to her through some other Jewish person!** Somehow she must have known that the God of Israel had one day promised to send his own Messiah into the world, a true descendant of King David, to redeem his people. For when she calls out to Jesus, she uses the proper Messianic title to signify this very thing: *"Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon!" (Matthew 15:22)*

It's impossible to be in possession of a great faith, without attaining some necessary knowledge about God. This is the same God who says to us in our Lord Jesus Christ not only, *"Come to me all of you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest and take my yoke upon you!"* who also goes on to say, *"Learn of me!"* May I say that again, two times? *"And learn of me, and learn of me . . . for I am gentle and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light!" (Matthew 11:28-30)*

Let's remember that this woman was not in a foreign country when she encounters Jesus, he was. Shortly after the feeding of the 5000 and the rescue of his disciples who were so greatly imperiled at sea, Jesus goes into Gentile territory in the hopes of finding perhaps a little bit more anonymity; hopefully the Paparazzi will not be able to find him there, to take a photo of him and post it on Facebook or any other such form of social media!

Friends, we don't hardly ever see **Jesus aligning himself with the Pharisees, do we? But he certainly comes off as sounding very "pharisaical" to this poor Canaanite woman here!** So often Jesus is always the DEFENDER OF THE UNDERDOG, but this certainly doesn't seem to be the case here!

So often, in a close study of the New Testament Gospels, we begin to notice a definite pattern. Jesus is **confronted by someone with a dire need**; either their own dire need or perhaps they are speaking on behalf of a son or a daughter or a faithful servant; but then the religious authorities, namely the scribes and the Pharisees come along and try to put the complete kibosh on what Jesus deigns to do for this poor soul. Either they object on the grounds that the one to be helped is a **"SINNER"** with a well-known reputation, or that **JESUS DARES TO HEAL A PERSON ON THE SABBATH** which they believe is a clear violation of Mosaic Law. But here, in our Gospel lesson this morning it is seemingly Jesus himself who is posing a roadblock to his own ministry of healing efforts! **SOMEONE HAS RIGHTLY POINTED OUT THAT THESE ARE THE HARSHTEST WORDS THAT WE EVER HEAR JESUS SAY TO ANY SUPPLICANT IN ALL OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GOSPELS!**

Actually, Jesus ends up snubbing this poor woman four different times: (1) First, when she calls out to Jesus for mercy, he obviously ignores her; he doesn't answer her even one word (v. 23). (2) Secondly, when his disciples regard her as nothing more than a **troublesome nuisance**, Jesus doesn't admonish his disciples as he does on other occasions! (v. 23) (3) Thirdly, when Jesus does answer her---he tells her that she is **disqualified from receiving his help** because she doesn't have even one drop of Jewish blood in her own body: **"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24)!** (4) Fourthly when she even now falls down on her knees before Jesus and calls out to him a second time, **"Lord, help me!"** – Jesus speaks some words to this woman that might have absolutely crushed her: **"It is not right to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs!" (v. 26)** But do you know what this poor beleaguered soul does next? She replies, **"Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table!" (v.27)**

In saying this, Martin Luther tells us (in a sermon he wrote way back in 1522, entitled: **"We Are Beggars"**) that this woman had a great faith because she wrings a "yes" out of Jesus' "no." And here, I am not spelling the word "wring" as "r-i-n-g," but as "w-r-i-n-g;" as if to wring every last drop of water out of a soaking-wet washcloth! Luther says that this Canaanite woman catches Jesus with his own words!

This woman has a great faith, not only because she has at least a limited knowledge of the God of the Old Testament, but she also knew that she had no real right to lay a claim on Jesus' help at all! After all, she wasn't Jewish, but even more importantly than that she was a sinner. And in many

respects, this woman in her approach to Jesus, was an awful lot like Jesus' own approach to God the Father, whose will he had come to do perfectly.

Just as Jesus was willing to “empty himself” of so many of his divine attributes, and take on the form of a servant, emptying himself completely of his own agenda and making of himself “nothing” (Phil. 2:5-11) in order to bear the burden of our sins, so this woman emptied herself completely of any sense of her self-importance too! Just as Jesus did everything he did because his love for the Heavenly Father and his love for the whole human race is—just that great; so this woman does everything she does because her love for her daughter was just that great too!

Obviously, Jesus was testing her faith here momentarily, in the same way that he tested the faith of those disciples when he first commanded them to feed the 5000! ***“When Philip asked Jesus: ‘Where, are we to buy bread for each of them to receive even a little?’”*** St. John goes on to tell us, ***“Jesus said this only to test them, for he knew what he would do!” (John 6:6)***

II. SECONDLY, A GREAT FAITH REQUIRES THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF ONE'S OWN NEED!

This Canaanite woman certainly recognized the greatness of her own need! She might have understood that as a Gentile, and as a Gentile woman to boot, that she had no real claim on Jesus because of her birthright, but she would never deny the greatness of her own need. She has a sick child whom she loves immensely and she is so desperate to find help for her daughter! She approaches Jesus not only with her belief that he is the long-awaited Promised Messiah of the Jewish people, but that he had the power within him to cast these demons out of her daughter that were woefully vexing her soul.

There is a prayer that we prayed as the Collect this morning that is taken directly from the Anglican tradition and is still found in the **BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER** though we Lutherans have borrowed it from our Episcopalian brothers and sisters many times. Roman Catholics, Presbyterians, Methodists and other Christians pray it too. It is known among us clergy-types today as **“THE PRAYER OF HUMBLE ACCESS”** and it goes like this: **“We do not presume to come to this Your Table O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in Your manifold and great mercies! We are not even worthy to gather up the crumbs under Your Table, but You are the same Lord whose property it is always to have mercy. Grant us therefore gracious Lord so to eat the flesh of Your dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood, that we may evermore dwell in him and he in us! Amen”**

III. THIRDLY, A GREAT FAITH REQUIRES SOME TRUE HUMILITY!

When we first read this Gospel lesson this morning, there are always those who have many problems with Jesus' treatment of this poor woman here! Some expositors of this text almost feel a need to apologize for Jesus because of his rude behavior here, or they do their best at least, to explain Jesus' words totally away! **The great, nationally-known, Methodist preacher, Dr. William Willimon once said that some preachers even feel a need to protect people from Jesus when he speaks forth unabashedly such forceful words here and in other places found in the Gospels!**

Is it possible, that Jesus really didn't mean it? "We're nice, enlightened, socially proper people and we'd never call someone else a dog," we say, don't we? "Would we ever call someone a dog, unless they were from Athens and the University of Georgia? Then we might call them "bulldogs!"

So some preachers like to point out that **the word for "dog" is in the diminutive form here in the Greek text;** meaning basically that Jesus calls her a "little dog," a puppy, suggesting that it's almost cute, isn't it? The popular Biblical scholar **William Barclay** suggests that whatever his words, **the smile on Jesus' face and the compassion in our Savior's eye would have softened the blow.** Maybe he winked at her as he said what he was saying; signaling that it was all nothing more than an inside joke!

The problem is that none of these apologies work for Jesus in the slightest! There is no sign in the text that Jesus is being friendlier than his words sound. **In our day we think of dogs as cute, and it's still an insult to call someone a dog, especially if they are female** and we call them by the name assigned to a female dog! **In Jesus' day, dogs were scavengers who ate dead things and who rummaged around in the garbage and spread diseases.**

They didn't have **dog shows** in the ancient world, or any high society ladies carrying poodles in their purses, the way that **Reese Witherspoon** does when she plays the part of a beautiful young woman who enters law school in an attempt to win back her boyfriend, in her 2001 great big box office hit, "**LEGALLY BLONDE!**"

BUT BACK TO THE CANAANITE WOMAN, SHE PERSISTS THROUGH IT ALL TO COME OUT SMELLING LIKE A ROSE IN THE END! What could she possibly mean when she says, "*But even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table!*"? Let's remember that St. Matthew saw a profound connection between Jesus' feeding the 5000 with those five barley loaves and two fish and the woman's words here, especially with regard to those 12 baskets full of leftovers, or crumbs, that were collected after that meal! In another upcoming chapter, Jesus will feed 4000 more people with even more baskets full of leftovers once again. Are you seeing the point? **Israel is fed in full. And then there are gobs of leftovers for us, who are not by right of bloodline through Abraham God's people! Friends, if there is that many leftovers, then obviously there is plenty of bread for us too!**

To belong all you have to do is to admit that you don't have a right to belong because of anything that is true in and of yourself apart from God! To belong you only have to admit your need for God's mercy for you to belong! That is to recognize we have no merit of our own, no good works of our own, no justification of our own, and there no price we could ever pay, with money or with any other tangible thing that we might have at our disposal to gain us membership into Christ and into fellowship with his people!

All God cares about today, like every Sunday, is that you and I come before him admitting our own need for what he alone can give to us. People you love may be healed. Others you love might become enraged! Nevertheless you will hear Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Lord say to you, this very One who was put to death for our transgressions, but raised again for our justification: "**Woman (Man), great is your faith!**"

Yet is it possible that there are some folks who maybe sit in church pews, just like these, who aren't really interested in what our God has to offer? The other day I was in a hospital waiting room, waiting to have a prayer with one of our church members about to go into surgery. I was interested to find the following article:

Dear Sirs,

I am not interested in buying a walk-in bathtub. I can't imagine what gave you the idea that I was. This morning, I received yet another email asking if I am "ready" for a walk-in bathtub. As I emailed the folks who have been emailing me about a six-day all-inclusive package vacation in Cancun, one of these days I actually need a six-day all-inclusive package vacation in Cancun—preferably in a hotel with no Internet hookup—if I keep getting asked if I'm ready for a walk-in bathtub.

It might interest you to know, by the way, that just yesterday I received an email that offered to put me in contact with "beautiful women from an exotic land looking for love." Does that sound like someone who is ready for a walk-in bathtub? (New Yorker, May 5, 2014 – edition)

On that day Jesus said, "Woman, great is your faith! Your daughter is healed!"

This is how St. Peter says it to all of us today in I Peter 2:9-10, *"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellency of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy!"* Amen