

An Old man attended a faith healing session. The preacher said, "Stand up and walk!" Then the old man proceeded to stand up from his wheelchair and slowly walked. The shocked crowd yelled in praise. The preacher asked him: "How are you feeling now?" The old man replied: "Fine but I still can't see!" This week in our reading from Matthew we have one of the great healing stories of Jesus' ministry. It's told a bit differently in Mark and some of the differences make for an interesting understanding of this episode for us this week. Part of this encounter is the description of the woman who wants her daughter healed and part is the exchange she and Jesus have with one another. Let's start with the exchange, which many people have questioned.

What's really going on here? Is Jesus being a bit of a jerk? Is he testing her? Is Jesus waiting until the right time like we see in John's gospel at the wedding in Cana when he tells his own mother that his time has not yet come? Is something sexist or even racist going on here? All of these ideas have been investigated over the centuries. Each has its merits and pondering them can open a door to knowing God more deeply. We shouldn't shy away from the questions. But to walk away from this reading with something worth something that nourishes our souls today, we will need some sort of answer because this is quite a conversation for the Prince of Peace.

The context in the gospel and the history are very important. In the gospel of Matthew, Jesus has just said some pretty horrible things about the religious leaders of his time proclaiming they are like the blind leading the blind. The disciples don't get it and he is not very nice to them either. He explains to people he believes should know better that ritual cleanliness is nothing compared to one's ethical behavior. In other words, to be religious and a jerk, makes you a jerk. And then the narrative moves to a new place and a new figure: the region of Tyre and Sidon and the Canaanite woman.

Both the region and the woman are gentile so the encounter is bound to be interesting. What comes out of her mouth is quite remarkable. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Have mercy on me would be a common phrase used in the relationship she has to Jesus: in need of assistance from a great rabbi. But it is also found in scripture, particularly in the Psalms. This is significant because she then calls Jesus Son of David. This is a legitimate title for him as the messiah and we see it elsewhere, but so is Son of God. Why this title? If we go back to the beginning of Matthew's gospel there is a genealogy. Matthew wants to establish Jesus from the start as a descendent of the line of David. Three women in the list are Canaanite: Rahab, Tamar, and Ruth. So the woman is no simpleton. She has crafted an address that is deep and meaningful, perhaps even piercing. She has come before Jesus in humility and is wise enough to draw him into remembering that they are blood kin, even if his religion might discourage him from thinking so.

This wise, humble, and tenacious woman, who risks herself for the sake of her daughter is now before Jesus and he gives her a comment about dogs. Most consider this to be a derogatory statement, perhaps even a racial slur about Gentiles. Is Jesus racist? Some have argued that if he is truly human, even the Son of God can lose his patience and stoop down to his lowest self. But in the context of Matthew's gospel, having just taught about the evil that can come out of one's heart through what they speak, this doesn't completely fit. Is he tired and cranky? Again,

the explanation needs to hold water and since he just fed five thousand when he was tired, cranky, and grieving, it probably doesn't work. What about testing her faith?

Earlier, Jesus does say to the disciples he sends out two by two that they should only go to the lost children of Israel. He is the Jewish Messiah and his first objective is to bring the sheep back home. Yes, we see as the gospel progresses and in certain other places, like the magi from the east for example, that Jesus' message travels far and wide for all people, but there is still a focus on the house of Israel. So if we have a Gentile asking for a very big favor, is it ok if she is asking because she needs something or if she truly has faith? Can an exception be made?

Besides fitting more neatly as an explanation, the other reason I like to think of this exchange as a test is because she passes it with flying colors. She persists, and is rewarded. And in some sense, not rewarded by Jesus, but he says by her own faith. In the conversation, Jesus actually does nothing but help her see just how real her faith truly is. In other words, she didn't really need that man in the first place. But we are grateful that she went to Jesus for our sakes because now we have a story which might enrich our lives and strengthen our faith.

What about persistence and how it impacts our faith? What about persistence as evidence of faith? Maybe we can start by thinking about the term faith. It can have a number of meanings. Here, it is being used to mean trust in God. Many people pray regularly but have little faith. This is why Jesus is always upset with the religious leaders of his time. We also mistake this idea of faith with blind trust, which it certainly is not. Rather, through prayer and an open disposition to life, we see that there are grave injustices all around us which could make us want to be a little turtle and hide away. Whenever the disciples do this, Jesus pushes them out of their fear and gets them moving again. Faith is not foolishly jumping off a cliff and saying God catch me. It is moving forward knowing things will be difficult as we trust that we are marching in the light of God. In this way, persistence is evidence of faith.

And faith can bring about a spirit of persistence. Certainly we turn to God when things are rough, when our loved ones are sick, and yes, when we face the demonic in life. For the believer, something inside draws us to the Divine even in the most difficult times, especially in these times, and our connection to the Almighty can often help us find the courage and fortitude to carry on. We see this in Isaiah's words to ancient Israel, a prophecy to encourage them to continue in prayer, such that all the world will know God through the nation of Israel. And we see this in our courageous woman in Matthew's gospel today, one of those people Isaiah was referring to, who has come to the nation of Israel. Their faith has led to their persistence; their persistence is evidence of their faith.

I'm reminded here of the wonderful hymn *How Firm a Foundation Ye Saints of the Lord* which would be a wonderful way to round this all off: How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in His excellent word! What more can He say than to you He hath said, To you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?/ That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, I'll never, no, never, no, never forsake!"