

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

16th August 2020 – Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

MATTHEW 15:21-28

BY GRACE, THROUGH FAITH

Have you ever had the experience when you've been disappointed with the response you've received from someone when you went to ask them for help? You needed some help, some assistance or some practical advice and support, and the person or perhaps the organisation you went to in order to get this assistance didn't respond to your request in the way you thought they would. Ever had that experience? My guess is that most, if not all, of us can probably relate to this on some level or another. And then, perhaps think about why you felt disappointed and let down. Was it that because of your relationship with that person you thought they would assist you? Did the reputation of this person or organisation, or what they themselves claimed to stand for, lead you to expect that by asking for help from them you would receive it? You made the approach for help expecting to receive it, but you weren't assisted like you expected to be.

And, if you can relate to this, what did you do then? Did you keep on asking, or did you just grumble and go away? If we know the person really well, like a family member, we might keep on asking getting more and more angry when their response isn't what we want. But I suspect that if we don't know them so well our response can often be to just grumble and walk away (there are still stores I won't go to because in the past they didn't deal with my requests like I expected them to). To be silent, and just go away, can often be how we respond when we don't get the response to our requests that we want.

This disappointing response to a request for assistance is exactly what happens in our Gospel reading for today, from how we view it anyway. We are told here that a woman, a non-Jewish, Canaanite, woman, comes to Jesus one day and asks Him for His help in casting demons out of her daughter. It's the kind of thing Jesus has done before, in fact not long before this we are told that people came to Jesus to merely touch Him and be healed. To help this woman is all in a day's work, surely?

Instead, what we read here is a response from Jesus that we don't really expect. This woman, because she lived in those times and knew the deep divide between the Jews and the Canaanites, she may well have been expecting Jesus' response first up. Firstly, Jesus says to her, 'I was only sent to the people of Israel' (v. 24). Wow! Not the response we expect from our loving, caring Saviour! But then, when you think it can't get any worse, it does. While many of us may have just slunk away at this point and told everyone we could that this guy is really a fraud and a fake, the woman keeps on asking for Jesus' help. This time, it seems He calls her and all of her people dogs! Wow again! At first reading, this is one of those Bible stories we don't really know what to do with.

For us, both of these responses of Jesus are a surprise, a shock. For this woman, and for the disciples and anyone else who heard them, they probably weren't. There was great animosity between the Jews and the Canaanites, still is today. Jesus was the Messiah come to help God's people. Why should He help this woman?

But then, of course, it ends the way we expect it to. In the face of her repeated requests for help, and because He is ready to prove His point to the disciples, Jesus simply says to her: "You really do have a lot of faith, and you will be given what you want." (*Matthew 15:28 CEV*) 'You really do have a lot of faith', Jesus says to her. Compare that to the reading we had last week, Jesus and Peter walking on water. In that account we are told that Jesus said to Peter; 'You certainly don't have much faith. Why do you doubt?' (*Matthew 14:31 CEV*) The disciple, the follower of Jesus who has heard Jesus' teaching and seen His miracles, is here contrasted with the person from outside of God's people who comes and persistently asks for help, knowing that the One she asks both can and will heal her daughter. But in the end, it's not a story about her persistence, but of God's grace for us all.

This is a Gospel story, a story of the good news of God's love. It's a story about God's love and grace for us all. God's grace which means that all He gives us is totally undeserved on our part. It doesn't matter what our heritage is, or what surname we have (sorry, to all of us with German names). It doesn't matter how well we know Jesus, or even what we believe we have done for God. This woman is unnamed, and as far as we can tell this is the only time she is mentioned in the Bible.

But it is only her, and another non-Jew, the Roman centurion at Capernaum, whom Jesus publicly praises for their great faith. The faith that Jesus praises is the faith of the person who comes before Him not making promises, or offering deals, or even trying to prove why they deserve His love and His help. It is the faith of the one who, like this woman, simply comes with an attitude of humility, kneeling in worship, and asks, 'Please, help me Lord'.

Do you ever struggle with your faith? Do you ever struggle to see or understand what relevance your faith has in your life? Perhaps you might be praying and asking God for His help for people in your life, or for things happening in your own life, or for everything our world is going through at the moment, and you also might feel like saying, 'Lord, at least give me some of the crumbs from your table!' Do I have enough faith? If I don't, will God still hear me and answer me? Have I gone so far away from God that I can't come back? Does God expect me to do things to earn His love that I just can't do?

We are reminded again here in this Gospel account, in such a simple and straightforward way, that God's love, that love which sees Him answer our prayers in the way that is best for us, this love is there truly for us all. No matter where we are, no matter how far we feel we have gone from God, no matter how low we feel our faith is, He hears us and responds to us.

We don't always get complete and honest accounts of people's faith and what it means to them, but one time we often do is at a funeral. It's at that time when either in the words of the person themselves, or from someone who knew them well, we can see this kind of open-handed faith and what it has meant to someone in their life. Today as part of our worship service we have a memorial for Noel Henseleit. Noel died back in late April, when the COVID 19 restrictions were tight here in Queensland, so only 10 people could attend his funeral. We wanted to honour Noel in our church more publicly than we could back then, and to give thanks to God for all He has done through Noel. Noel's eulogy, taken from the life story he wrote himself, contains these reflections on his faith: 'I thank God that I was able to grow up with this Christian influence in my life and that I have been able to serve Him and my fellow man in various ways. I thank Him for the blessings He has bestowed upon myself, my wife and children. I thank Him for my health and the ability to work and the skills

that I have acquired throughout my life'. A faith that looks to God as the provider of all things, and that comes to God simply giving thanks for all that has been received. A faith like this knows the Gospel, knows that everything we receive is a free gift from God.

By grace, through faith. This not only defines the relationship of this Canaanite woman with Jesus, and reflects Noel's faith in his life, but it's also what lies at the core of our relationship with God. People will sometimes let us down, even those close to us; they're people. In the same way we ourselves will also sometimes let people down. But what we are reminded of here is that, through just the simplest prayer, and the smallest amount of faith which causes that prayer to be made, God never lets us down. By God's grace, may your faith continue to enable you to call out to Him, so that you continue to experience His love, grace, healing and forgiveness also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

By Grace

Everything that we receive from God, from His love and forgiveness through to the things we have and enjoy in our lives, is a gift of God's grace; a free gift which comes to us through His love.

- What blessings do you have in your life through God's grace?
- Although we don't do anything ourselves to earn these things, what are some ways we can respond to God's amazing grace?

Through Faith

With just the smallest amount of faith, we can make that prayer to God which both Peter on the water and this woman from Canaan made; 'Please help me, Lord!'.

- Do have times when you feel that your prayers to God remain unanswered, or that He is not in your life?
- How can you respond to this? God hasn't moved, you have. How can you come back to Him?
- When our faith is small and threatened is it easy to call out to God for help? Ask Him to always give you the faith to be able to do this.

We Are Always Worthy

We are always worthy to come before God and ask for His help and forgiveness, even when we don't feel we are.

- What things can make you feel unworthy of God's love?
- Reflect on God's love for you in creating you; Jesus' death and resurrection for you; the Holy Spirit coming to you through your Baptism, His Word, and Holy Communion.
- Pray that you will be able to see God's love and His blessings in your life.