

Raw Need and Great Faith

Almost eight hundred years before Christ, the Kingdom of Judea was ruled by a king named Ahaz. Ahaz was a poor ruler with a big problem. Ten of the Twelve Tribes of Israel had joined forces with the Aramites—who were enemies of Judea—and were planning to invade the country. Together they were much more powerful than Judea. But Ahaz had come up with a plan to defeat them. His plan was to join in an alliance with Assyria, which at that time was the most powerful kingdom in the world and ruled over a large empire. This was not a good plan. Assyria, he reasoned, would help him defeat the enemy. When an ant forms an alliance with an elephant, the elephant calls the shots. An alliance with Assyria would effectively turn Judea into a vassal state, a colony of Assyria. That meant that the King of Assyria would be the de facto ruler of Judea and Ahaz would merely be his lackey. As I said, Ahaz was not the brightest light in the candelabra. So God sent the prophet Isaiah to convince Ahaz that he had a better plan. Isaiah explained to Ahaz that if instead of joining forces with Assyria, he would simply trust God, God would defeat his enemies and Judea would remain a sovereign nation. He urged Ahaz to for a miraculous sign from God to prove that God meant what He said. But he warned Ahaz, “If you do not stand in your faith, you will not stand at all. Ahaz was not impressed. He liked his own plan better than God’s plan so he refused to ask for a sign and went his own way. As a result, within one generation the Assyrians invaded Judea and the country was plundered. Ahaz is a perfect example of someone who would rather rely on himself than seek help from God. As people become more and more convinced of their self-sufficiency they feel less and less of a need for God. In their eyes, God becomes a hindrance rather than a resource. *This is especially true of those who govern.* Governments tend to resent the existence of any power superior to their own power. Today’s Psalm says it perfectly: “the kings of the earth gather together against the Lord and against His Messiah. They say, ‘let us break their chains and cast off their fetters.’” Those words perfectly describe the path America is headed down right now. Many Americans have become so convinced of their country’s power and impregnability that they see little need for God. As evidence of this I refer once again to words recently spoken by the governor of the state of New York, who said, “we don’t need help from above to solve this problem; we can do it by ourselves.” As we enter the sixth month of this pandemic with no end in sight, we might want to reassess that strategy. America needs God. Today’s gospel lesson is about a woman who clearly understood her need for God and acted accordingly. The story of her encounter with Jesus is a study in raw need accompanied by great faith. In one way the story is problematic because Jesus initially speaks to the woman in what seems like a harsh and uncaring way. We think of Jesus as gentle and loving, not uncaring and harsh. That has prompted some biblical scholars to come up with novel ways of trying to explain Jesus’ apparent harshness.

One scholar suggested that Jesus may have had a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face when he spoke the offensive words—in other words that he was joshing with the woman and didn't mean to be taken seriously. That scholar should be given an "a" for creativity and an "f" for scholarship. There's not a shred of evidence in the New Testament that Jesus, the man of sorrows, ever joshed with anyone, least of all when it came to demon possession. Another scholar suggested that maybe Jesus was "playing to the gallery": i.e., giving the woman a hard time in order to provide an example to his disciples of how you *should not* treat someone who comes to you in need. As if to say, "see how I treated her? Don't do that!" But the idea that Jesus would belittle a person who came to him in desperate need just to make a point with his disciples is highly unlikely. It doesn't fit with everything we know about Jesus' character. The reason, of course, that people try to explain away Jesus' words is that they can't imagine why he would treat anyone this way. But just because his words offend us, it doesn't give us license to try to make them mean something different than they plainly mean. When we start trusting our own sensibilities more than we do God's word, we start down a very slippery slope. We're better advised to wrestle with the difficult passages of scripture and see what God can teach us through the process. So let's take the story line by line and see what we can make of it.

[Matthew 15:21-22] "Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, 'Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession' "To begin with, this is a surprising statement coming from a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were enemies of the Israelites and had been since Joshua invaded Canaan and took their land away from them. The Canaanites didn't worship the God of Israel: they worshipped pagan gods. Yet this Canaanite woman addresses Jesus as "Lord" and "Son of David," the former being a synonym for God and the latter a term that denoted the messiah. Somehow she knew that Jesus was both God and The Messiah and that therefore he could help her daughter.

[Matthew 15:23-24] "Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, 'send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.' he answered her, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.'" This is the only time in the scriptures that Jesus turns down a plea for help. And it's difficult to understand the reason he gives her for doing so since he had already exorcised a demon from the Gederene demoniac, who also was not an Israelite. Nevertheless, Jesus ignores her request. But that doesn't stop this woman. [Matthew 15:25] "the woman came and knelt before him. 'Lord, help me!' she said." There is no greater human love than a mother's love for her child. I recall an incident that took place many years ago in lake Lucerne—the community where I live. It was the fourth of July and a big celebration was going on at the beach. There was a large field next to the beach where a softball game was going on.

As a family arrived in the parking lot and a mother and father and their little boy were getting out of their car, someone hit a towering drive that came down and hit the little boy on his shoulder. He screamed and started crying and his mother took him in her arms to comfort him. I happened to be close to them and I could see the look on the mother's face as she hugged her child. I don't think I've ever seen more rage on a human face. Her teeth were bared and she looked positively feral. Someone had hurt her child and you don't mess with mama's kids. So the perseverance of the Canaanite woman in the face of rejection is not surprising. She had a sick daughter and she would do anything to get help.

[Matthew 15:26] "he replied, 'it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.'" Unthinkable! How could Jesus possibly say this? He not only refuses to help the woman, he calls her a dog, which next to pigs was considered the lowest of all animals. So first Jesus rejects her plea for help and then he adds insult to injury. Why? Well, instead of focusing on our response to Jesus' words, let's focus on how the woman responds to them.

[Matthew 15:27] "'yes, Lord' she said, 'but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.'" Now to say the very least, this response is remarkable. She doesn't take offense. She doesn't get angry. She doesn't let pride get in her way. She doesn't try to reason with Jesus or arouse his pity. She doesn't say, "you've healed others: why won't you heal my daughter?" She just says, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." She has a raw need to get help for her child and she knows Jesus can provide it. And she's content with a crumb because she knows that a crumb that comes from Jesus is all that her daughter needs. *So she just takes Jesus at his word.* And Jesus is always as good as his word.

The Canaanite woman had raw need and she had great faith. It's hard for people who think of themselves as self-sufficient to feel great need so it's hard for them to have great faith. But raw need and great faith are the best two things any of us can have. God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth, and the main thing standing in the way is the pride of man—his desperate, delusional desire to be self-sufficient. We can't be self-sufficient—and you'd think we would know that by now. But we don't. In spite of massive evidence to the contrary, we continue to think of ourselves as fairly efficient machines that run smoothly most of the time and only need a tune-up every now and then. But that's not what we are. We are train wrecks happening every day. And God alone can put us back on the tracks. So once again: America needs God. Why did Jesus put the woman through the ringer before helping her? I don't know. I do know that God has said: "my thoughts are not your thoughts and your ways are not my ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

So I'm content to say, "I don't know why you spoke to the woman that way, Jesus, but I do know that you gave her what she needed when she put her trust in you and took you at your word. I don't know why God has allowed a tiny micro-organism to bring America to its knees. Maybe it's because God wanted to bring Americans to their knees.

One day the Lord will return. Disease and death will be swallowed up and he will cast out sin and pride forever. He will set a place for us at table with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob—and the Canaanite mother and her daughter—at the wedding feast of the lamb in the New Jerusalem of God. And there we will feast on more than crumbs. Amen.

