

Wesley United Methodist Church

August 20, 2017

“A Strong-willed Woman.”

Matthew 15:21-18

Have you ever noticed that some women are equal to any occasion? And they can be as tough as NFL Linebackers. I heard about one woman in a farming community years ago who went to a meeting usually dominated by men. They were discussing some important issues critical to farmers. About midway through the meeting this woman stood up and spoke her piece. One of the old farmers didn't like her intrusion. He jumped to his feet and said, “What does she know about anything. I would like to ask her if she knows how many toes a pig has.” Quick as a flash, the woman answered, “Take off your boots, Fred, and count them yourself.”

Our scripture reading from today is about a woman who knew how to dish it out as well as to take it. Interestingly enough, she wasn't Jewish. She was a Canaanite. Today she would probably be referred to as a Palestinian. Her situation would be no better today than it was in that day and time because strong prejudices still exist in that part of the world, as well as in our own. This woman came to Jesus with a heavy burden. Above the din of the crowd the woman got Jesus' attention by crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon possession.”

Jesus response is interesting, primarily because it was, for all practical purposes, non-existent. In other words, he gave no response. Matthew tells us that he didn't answer. The compassionate Jesus seemed to ignore the woman who had a very urgent need. Her daughter was possessed by a demon, whatever that means. It could mean that she was a typical teenager. I'm just kidding, of course. Whatever it was, her mother was very concerned about her and she was crying after Jesus and he was ignoring her.

So, his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.” Even the disciples seemed to be distraught by Jesus' failure to address the woman's need, and they were getting tired of her outbursts.

Then Jesus addressed the problem. He said, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.” In other words, he was saying, “I wasn't sent to reach Canaanites. I was sent to reach the Jews.” Think about that statement for a moment. If the story ended right here, you and I would be lost. We would not be in this place. Our lives would be meaningless and cold. “I was sent to the lost sheep of Israel.”

Jesus had a very specific mission. He had not come as a political revolutionary, or even as a charismatic leader. He had come with the intent of creating a new understanding of God which was built upon the foundation of the Jewish faith. His ministry was aimed primarily at teaching his disciples, training them in what the kingdom was all about. His miracles, his acts of healing, all his teachings were tools to help him to portray the grace of God. He had compassion with people and this is what he did when he saw sickness, misery, and loss.

This Canaanite woman seems to have caught him off guard. All of us have been there. We are working on a project that is important to us. And someone interrupts us and it takes a moment for us to get our brains engaged again. I was thinking that this is a sign that Christ was totally and completely human.

The woman would not be put off. She came and knelt before him, “Lord, help me!” she said. Then Jesus answered her with this statement, “It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.” Ouch! No matter how you try to break down this statement, it seems to reflect the typical Jewish prejudice of that time against Gentiles. I would have liked to have seen his face when he made this statement...was it just some humorous wordplay? Maybe they shared a knowing smile at this point... It seems much more likely than that he was insulting her. Even more likely is that Jesus was testing the woman.

Fortunately, this Canaanite woman was able to hold her own against such prejudice. “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table.” Now we know that Jesus was struck by the woman's statement. He answered her, “Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted.” And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

There are some powerful lessons in this little story. The first is about the power of persistence. This woman was not going to be put off. She annoyed the disciples. She was ignored for a time, even by the Lord. But she was determined she was going to make her voice heard. Good for her. Too many people cave in. They give up too quickly. This is often the dividing line between those who succeed in life and those who fail. You can see it in every profession. Determination and persistence, the willingness to stick to a task until you are successful. This Canaanite woman came to Jesus to ask him to heal her daughter and she would not be denied, even if she did annoy the disciples, and even if Jesus himself initially rebuffed her.

Another plus for her is that she spoke up. She made her request known, even when the disciples tried to quiet her. Sometimes you have to do that. You have to make your voice heard.

Some women are hesitant to speak up as are some men. Some of this is cultural conditioning. It could make a difference where you're from or it could be parental conditioning. Sometimes you have to make your voice be heard.

Eleanor Roosevelt, wife of the 32nd President of the United States, knew how to assert herself. She once left the White House to visit a prison in Baltimore. Her departure was so early in the morning that she decided not to disturb her husband. Shortly after he got up, he contacted her secretary to ask where his wife was. She replied, "She's in prison, Mr. President." "I'm not surprised," replied FDR, "But what for?" Eleanor Roosevelt was a woman of strength. She was controversial, but she was not reluctant to speak her mind about things she considered important.

Jesus told a parable about another such woman. Remember? "In a certain town there was a judge who neither feared God nor cared about men. And there was a widow in that town who kept coming to him with the plea, 'Grant me justice against my adversary.' For some time he refused. But finally he said to himself, 'Even though I don't fear God nor care about men, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will see that she gets justice, so that she won't eventually wear me out with her coming!'" (Luke 18:205)

This woman wasn't about worried being nice. She wasn't worried what others thought of her. Only one thing mattered. Justice. Doing what was right. Taking a stand for what was good and decent and lasting. We are called to do the same, but it is not easy for many of us to speak up. Christ calls us to be people of persistence and determination. Christ calls us to speak up, to make our voices heard.

Then there was Jesus' ultimate response to the woman's plea. "Woman, you have great faith!" he said. "Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

Do you understand that this is what faith is all about? It's not simply believing. "Even demons believe and tremble," said the writer of James. " (James 2:19) Faith is more than intellectual assent. Faith is going in the direction God has called you to go. Faith is speaking out for those truths you know God approves. Faith is believing when times get tough and friends forsake you, that your cause is just. Jesus saw this woman's faith and he granted her request. What a great lesson we can learn from her.

My motto has always been this: "If you want a thing bad enough go out and fight for it, work day and night for it, give up your time, your peace, and your sleep for it...if all that you dream and scheme is about it, and life seems useless and worthless without it...if you gladly sweat for it and fret for it and plan for it and lose your terror of the opposition for it... if neither cold, poverty, famine, not gaunt, sickness nor pain of body and brain, can keep you away from the thing you want...with the help of God, you will get it." Never give up. Always speak up. And hear the Master say, "Woman or Man you have great faith! Your request is granted!"