

14TH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST (Proper 18)
September 6, a.D. 2009
Mark 7: 24 – 30

Holy Scripture never gives us her name. That which is important is told us. And the first thing we learn about her is she is a mother of a daughter who needed an exorcism. The very next thing we learn about her is her persistence. Even though Jesus wanted some quiet time by hiding himself away in a house, this devoted mother found him and bowed down at his feet.

The next thing we learn about her is where she is from. She lives in the coastal city of Tyre, belonging to Phoenicia, which harbours the descendants of Canaan, Baal-worshippers. Of course this means she isn't Jewish. And that is important for what comes next.

What was it about this foreign-born woman that she wanted an audience with a Jewish man and was convinced that he could help her daughter who was demon possessed?

The religious Jews named anything unclean that even touched a gentile. They were upset that Jesus' disciples were eating with unclean hands. So what of this gentile woman and her bold request?

She, like Jesus' great, great grandmother Rahab, who was also a Canaanite but at one time a prostitute, knew something of the people of Israel and their God but that knowledge didn't just float around in her head like a tidbit of trivia saved up for a board game. This woman like Rahab faced the truth. They both knew that they didn't come from Jewish stock, they did not try to hide from the one true God of Israel but acknowledged Him to be the Lord. They wanted to belong to His family even though foreign blood ran through their veins and their past was somewhat shady.

Faith sprang into action as living faith always does. From a deep love for her daughter and from the confidence that the God of Israel would not turn her away because of her ancestry or her past, this devoted mother was determined to bring her request to God.

Works flow naturally from faith as we heard from the book of James. Where there is a genuine faith, there you will find works that spring into action not out of force,

duress or for some reward but you can't stop them. Living faith always results in good works. They can't be stopped. They won't take no for an answer, just as that nameless, gentile woman who wouldn't take no for an answer.

But what of our Lord's answer to her? What should we make of his apparent coldness and aloofness? He seems to prefer Israelite over Gentile when he says that Israel's children should be fed first and their bread should not be given to the little dogs, a.k.a. the gentiles.

First, the bread of the children of Israel is the ministry of Jesus and all the blessings of body and soul He freely gives. He did come for God's chosen nation, Israel, as God's word freely says, but his love and mercy is too great a thing to stay there. As God chose Abraham to be the father of many nations, so God's salvation is for all who believe and all who believe become Abraham's children by faith, the new Israel, the one holy Christian church,

Second, the little dogs are the puppies who are allowed in the house of their owners. These are not the wild dogs roaming the back alleys and looking for food in garbage cans. These are the gentiles who believe in God. Our Lord's answer is not as harsh as we might first think.

Jesus grants the wish of the persistent mother, who admits that God came first for the Jew but also for the gentile. Just as God's prophet, Elijah brought healing and food for a widow living in Sidon and then raised her son from the dead, so Christ brings healing for the daughter of a woman, who believed the God of Israel and acknowledged his grace even for gentiles. Let's not forget that Jesus healed the girl. His gift of healing is like his gift of faith.

Faith alone justifies the sinner before God, whether Jew or Gentile. Rahab, the widow of Zarephath and the persistent mother of Tyre, were all born sinful. But they were all justified before God. They confessed in the God of Israel as their own and in Him, rested all their confidence. All a gift of God, and that gift of God has a way of spilling over into action.

A living faith sees what needs to be done and does it quickly, whether it's the dishes piling up in the sink, the laundry in the hamper, the garbage in the cans, or the sick and lonely, which need some company.