

August 14, 2011 9th Sunday After Pentecost Matthew 15:21-28

To the saints at St. John's Lutheran Church in Victor, New York, grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. As you are hearing this read my family and I are probably somewhere on the North shore of Lewey Lake in the Adirondacks creating a small worship service of our own. I think it is important for families to worship regularly, even when on vacation in remote areas.

Today's gospel reading is one that always leaves us scratching our heads in wonder. Did this foreign woman really just outwit Jesus? Did Jesus really just refuse to help this woman and call her and her entire race "dogs"?

When we consider our gospel writer Matthew we find ourselves asking, "Why did you include this? Of all the things you knew about Jesus' teachings and performing miracles why did you pick this over so many other things? Wouldn't it have been easier to just gloss over this little scene? After all, it doesn't put Jesus in a very good light." Matthew's exact

reasons for including this passage may never be known to us, but it does teach us many things.

This account comes on the heels of Jesus having a conflict with some Pharisees and religious teachers who came from Jerusalem. They were upset that Jesus' disciples didn't follow the religious laws and traditions. Jesus pointed out that in their literal application of the laws they were actually breaking the spirit of those same laws. He explained to them that the laws were not an end unto themselves; rather they were a guide to faithful living. Nevertheless the Pharisees and religious teachers were offended.

Given that these religious experts should have known how to be godly you would expect that a foreigner of a different religion would be really lost. However, in our gospel reading we find the opposite is true. Compared to the experts the foreign woman knows all about God. And, she even knows who Jesus is.

Consider her request, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David..." That statement reveals just how much she knows about

Jesus. Starting at the end, she calls him Son of David - showing that she, a foreigner, knows about God's promises to the descendants of David and she knows Jesus is a part of that line. She recognizes his legitimate kingship. Also in that statement she calls him Lord; acknowledging that he is superior and she is subservient. She starts off the request with the repentant words, "Have mercy on me..." From beginning to end this woman shows that she knows Jesus and is developing a solid foundation for faith.

This is not only a contrast with the religious leaders. It is a contrast with the disciples. Last week we read about Peter walking on the water. Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." Peter's request to Jesus was conditional - he wanted proof. As he sank Jesus said to him, "You of little faith..." But here the foreign woman does not ask for proof from Jesus. She does not say, "If you are the Lord and the Son of David, command my daughter to be healed." She knows it is the Lord and that he can do what she asks. Jesus' response to her is, "Woman, great is your faith."

There is something about the nature of faith that we should pay attention to here. We tend to assume that we know what faith is, and our problem is that we do not have enough of it. But that is not what we learn about faith in this reading. Faith is not a quantity to be measured. Rather it is a way of life that recognizes the Lordship of Jesus and trusts that completely.

Perhaps computers can help us understand this better. Many people consider faith to be a program like antivirus software that they load onto their computer. The antivirus software is supposed to keep them safe from threats. Of course it is important to update and upgrade the software regularly so that new threats are covered.

But faith is not antivirus software. Faith is properly understood as the entire operating system the computer uses. Everything in the computer uses the operating system as its platform to work. Without it nothing works.

The Pharisees and religious leaders rejected the need for Jesus' operating system, preferring their own instead. Peter

and the disciples saw faith as antivirus software. But this foreign woman uses faith as the operating system. This is what makes her so firm and secure in her strong requests of Jesus. For her Jesus is not just one option of many she could choose from. He was the only way.

That is another important lesson from the gospel reading. This text is often interpreted to teach that we should overcome barriers between men and women, different races and ethnic groups, and any sort of barrier we humans create. While it is true that before God we are all sinners in need of his grace, and we shouldn't exclude anyone, this text is not intended to teach us tolerance or political correctness.

Accepting people's differences has become an end unto itself in our culture. We are to respect the beliefs and opinions of others, and we expect them to respect ours. Everyone puts on a face of niceness and pleasantness. Ultimately we end up not standing for anything.

But Jesus never taught this. He was quite clear that the good news of his love was to be spread throughout the world.

Too often people use acceptance of others as an excuse for laziness. They won't evangelize because it might "offend" someone else's personal beliefs. While we should never present our faith in offensive ways, it should also be quite visible in our lives. Again, faith is not antivirus software. It is the operating system of our entire lives. We should witness to that with sincerity and courage.

Did this foreign woman actually outwit Jesus? No. Did she catch him in a bad mood or with his compassion down? No. The gospel has made it quite clear that Jesus is in control of every time and situation. His compassion was never more fully tested than on the cross but it remained strong there too. No, the story of this foreign woman and Jesus teaches us about the nature of faith.

Faith is a way of life that recognizes Jesus as Lord of all. It witnesses to the compassion of Jesus as Lord, and to God's loving purposes for the world. Faith resists all attempts to control it, limit it, or even perfectly define it. Faith empowers us to live with boldness and confidence, not letting

other people or social expectations define us, but God and God alone.

May you live every day by faith in God's will. Amen