

Sunday, August 20, 2023
Matthew 15:21-28; "Bound and Determined"
The Rev. Joan Withers Priest, preaching

What is the most daring act you've ever done? Climbed a mountain? Jumped from an airplane with a parachute? Attempted a triple flip off the high dive? I've been up in a Hot Air Balloon twice, that was cool and terrifying.

Charles Blondin, was a world famous French 19th century acrobat, and his most famous trick - was crossing over Niagara Falls on a tightrope. He did this not just once, but repeatedly, with many variations, even carrying different objects.

The story goes that one day a crowd watched Blondin cross the tightrope numerous times, and each time they roared their applause and the tightrope walker roared back at the crowd, "Do you believe I can do it again?" "YES!" shouted the crowd. And he did it again. "Do you believe I can walk this tightrope pushing a wheelbarrow?" "YES!" shouted the crowd. And he did it. "Do you believe I can walk this tightrope carrying a person on my back?" "Yes" shouted the crowd. "Then who will volunteer?" Dead silence! Not a soul responded. Oh sure, they believed he could do it but no one had that kind of faith to volunteer, that kind of complete trust to say, pick me. Would you? Not me!

The woman we meet in our scripture passage this morning not only had that kind of trust in Jesus Christ but had faith so as to remove mountains!

So, Jesus is exhausted and seriously in need of a day off. Jesus had traveled hundreds of miles, the lame now walk, the blind now see, last Sunday he walked on water, he has fed 5,000, preached hundreds of sermons, withstood attacks from the Scribes and Pharisees. The "come to me all you who are weary Jesus" has become the "go away all of you because I'm weary" Jesus. So he travels some 100 miles out of his way for a little peace and quiet - and here comes this woman - screaming at him! The disciples beg him to tell her to go away and Jesus does what most people do who don't want to deal with someone who is annoying them - he turns and tries to ignore her - "maybe she'll just go away if I pretend not to notice her"! But her persistence is non-stop.

Now, this is the only place in the Gospels where Jesus, essentially, enters into an argument! And let's be honest, we really don't like the Jesus of this passage. We like Jesus as Divine; Jesus who performed miracles, healed the sick, told beautiful stories, not the Human Jesus who gets angry or overwhelmed. Not the one who knocks over tables or calls people names! But here's the thing, Jesus had been raised and believed in his heart that he came to save the Jews, he was the fulfillment of the Jewish law and prophets, Israel's hope and consolation; that was his mission and it was a big one. So instead of merely walking away, as she persists, he protests, "Let the children be fed first." In other words, "I have enough to deal with handling the saving of all the Jews, let alone start saving Gentiles!"

But truth be told, we really don't like the name calling - "dogs"? But back then, the Gentiles, the pagans, the outsiders, were all called dogs. Back then, those Gentiles had no business being in the company of Jews, it was unheard of, Jews were not allowed by law to associate with foreigners, like the Gentiles, they were considered unclean! Why on earth throw pearls to swine, take children's food and throw it to dogs, when he is a shepherd for the flock of Israel, who are children of Abraham? But the argument continues, why? because, this woman

just won't give up! And because this passage isn't about Jesus rejecting this woman or Jesus being human and getting frustrated; this is about a woman being bound and determined.

What was with this woman? Why was she so persistent? I'll give you two reasons. Love and faith. First, this woman was a mother and her daughter was ill – in fact, her daughter had an unclean spirit which probably meant she was mentally ill, and back then the mentally ill were seen as possessing evil spirits and so they were shunned, ostracized, treated horribly; many of whom were sent to live among the graves of the dead. This woman didn't care about her gender or her nationality or even the prohibitions of her own religion. In fact she was stepping outside of her own religious tradition, risking criticism from her own people. But we're talking about her daughter, and most mothers and fathers, will knock anyone out of their way to help their kid.

Anyone who has ever had a seriously ill child knows, you can become a little, well, desperate. It makes you yell at receptionists who won't set up that doctor's appointment when you want it, it makes you very rude to doctors who appear to know your child better than you do, it makes you stay up all night researching clinics or treatments. (1)

Believe it or not, my now 6 foot tall, 29 year old son Jacob was born very early, very small, and there were concerns. When they scheduled a surgery at 18 months old, even though it wasn't life threatening, I was still terrified, he was so little! After the surgeon quickly went over the procedure giving us facts and such, and then stood up to shake our hands, we basically said, "now you can sit right sit back down here a minute, you're talking about our little boy and we have a lot of questions for you before you pick up that scalpel!" When it comes to my kids, no matter their age, no matter the circumstance, if they aren't being treated right or if there is a problem, I become like a mother bear, protective, persistent. Am I right?!

Hope was standing right in front of this woman, hope for her daughter, and she wasn't going to be shoved aside and she certainly wasn't going to take no for an answer. Desperate belief gave her the courage to fall down at his feet and beg for a miracle and that's called faith. Isn't it interesting that some came to Jesus with the possibility something might happen to them, this woman came knowing it would – with a passionate hope, a clamant sense of need, a refusal to be discouraged, her deep love as a parent - - and - - the second reason, her deep faith in this man, this Son of David, this prophet from God. One pastor writes, "This is the day that the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to the dogs." (2) This is the day Jesus crossed boundaries, expanded his belief of love and mercy, opening himself and his ministry to the world.

She was persistent because she loved her child with all her heart, and soul, and strength, and she believed. Heathen though she might be, she was bound and determined, no matter what, hook or by crook, she would get her daughter help. She knew Jesus had the power of God. And so she fell to her knees and begged, "Lord, help me." Such an insult as calling her a dog should have felt like a slap on the face, but not to this woman. She had faith and trust and comes right back at him, saying, "so get up and get with it Jesus" – "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the children's' table!" Is your God so exclusive that you won't even heal my daughter?

He must have been amazed at her incredible insight into the inclusive power, presence and grace of God. "Wow," he says, "great is your faith!" What he now recognized was the truth – all are to be saved. Because of her great faith, "He now saw a little [sick] girl instead of a theological argument; a mother's fierce love instead of a woman of a despised nation." (3) In the end he goes against every religious law and begins a new law, love your neighbor. And

once again Jesus struggled with his own understanding of God's mission for him; and with this woman, Jesus' mission changes and he begins a more inclusive, broader mission which included Jew, Greek, slave, free, rich, poor, male and female.

Far beyond merely tolerating one another, Christian faith points to an appreciation for diversity that engages the other. That embraces the other. We have a lot of people here in this church, outside these doors in this community, and in our world, who are in need of our help, our comfort, our hope, our love – and some of those people are very different from us and believe very different things than we do. Regardless of their gender, nationality, religious creed, sexual orientation, and maybe even political persuasion, we are to love them. When we encounter “those people”, we need to remember this woman who stepped outside her comfort zone for help, and received not crumbs, but the Bread of Life. We need to offer this as well.

This passage also teaches us that the church must keep discovering its mission, just like Jesus did here. For our mission comes from God, not from the world – the church is not just a safe place to hold on to good values or a safe place from the dangerous world out there – because, as Jesus did, we find the presence of God in the cry of those who need help out there – who need help in here. And we need to trust God, like this woman and have faith, like this woman – for God knows where we need to be going, and as a congregation, as a church, God will carry us through.

The Session and maybe others in leadership here, will soon be reading a book recently published entitled, “When Church Stops Working: A Future for Your Congregation beyond More Money, Programs and Innovation.” We will be looking at who the church is today in our very secular society where the sacred and the secular are now very separate, the immanent and the transcendent are now very divided. We need to adapt to this new secular world and always know, always believe with passion, that God is in all of this.

Well, guess what. A volunteer eventually did step forward to be carried across Niagara Falls by Charles Blondin - in fact it was his manager. A man who had complete trust and faith in him. But before he was carried across those falls – successfully I might add – he was told by Blondin to close his eyes and empty all other thoughts but total and complete trust and faith in him and his abilities - if just for a second he tightened up and became scared, thinking about anything else except Blondin, they would fall. How's that for a story of trust and faith in a God who carries us into uncharted territories, who helps bring us safely to the other side of circumstances we face, trust that allows us to place our life in his hands, knowing God's got our back.

Jesus believed that he was sent to bring a new message to the Jews, but along the way he realized that his message was just as important, if not more important to the non-Jew, the Gentile, the woman, the child, the outsider. This unnamed woman came calling Jesus a popular political title – Son of David – and left calling him a personal one - Jesus my Lord and Savior. May we find in her the same resolute love and faith, love that knows no bounds, love for children, love for neighbor, all neighbors; and faith that knows no end, faith that is transforming, determined, and free. Amen.

(1) Florence, Anna Carter. *Lectionary of Homiletics*, August 2008, p. 31.

(2) Husted, Heidi. “When the Gospel goes to the dogs.” *Christian Century*, 8/16/2000.

(3) Fearon, Dr. Dana. “Religious right or radical left?” *Sermon*, 11/11/1994.