

“An Outsider’s Faith”

Matthew 15:21-28

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When I first read the story of the Canaanite woman approaching Jesus for help with a family matter, I wondered how it ever got included in the Bible. It doesn’t exactly make Jesus look good. His initial lack of compassion is a bit shocking; seems out of character. In time, I saw that the story is not about making Jesus look good; it’s about making the woman from a foreign land look good. It’s about lifting up the faith of a woman who is outside of the mainstream of life. It’s about the notion that faith is not limited by national boundaries or tribal loyalty or family heritage. Faith is a gift from God to anyone open to receiving that gift. And this Canaanite woman has got it! She’s got the faith!

Matthew was writing his Gospel for a church made up of people from all over the place. Some had a Jewish background. Some had a Roman background. Some had a Greek orientation. And there may well have been some tension in his church regarding acceptance of those who may not have been raised locally, or those who spoke a different language or used a different recipe for making scones. So this gripping story is meant to open people’s eyes to the gift of faith regardless of the identity of the person demonstrating it.

You have to love this Canaanite woman. Her faith propels her. Her faith sustains her. Her faith wins the day. Jesus is moved by the quality of her faith and by the persistence of her love. Matthew sees that it is precisely this kind of faith that is needed in a local church.

I've never seen one, but I could imagine a local congregation naming itself, "The Church of the Canaanite Woman."

As I reflect on my own faith development over an entire lifetime, I see that my faith has been deeply influenced by foreigners, by people who didn't grow up in the Congregational Church, by people from other lands and other races and other tribes. The woman from Canaan has been with me all along the way.

I think of McKinley Hackett, an African American man, a youth advisor at the United Methodist Church in Waltham, Massachusetts. I went to that church to be the youth minister during my seminary years. On the very first night of the very first youth group meeting, I realized I had never actually been in a youth group and that I had no idea what I was doing. It took McKinley Hackett about 5 minutes to realize this, too. At the end of that first youth group session, he approached me, reeking of kindness. He put his arm around my shoulder, and said, "Don't worry. We'll teach you how to do this ministry." And teach me he did! He taught me about meeting teenagers where they were, about listening to their hearts, and about believing that God works through our weaknesses as well as through our strengths. He and his wife were the only persons of color in that congregation, and they were the ones who really shaped my young faith and my understanding of ministry.

I think of Jenny Hunt, a full-blooded Lakota woman who lived in Eagle Butte on Cheyenne River Reservation. When we had the funeral for her neighbor down in Cherry Creek, Jenny was in charge of the reception. I got into line, picked up a paper plate and a fork, and proceeded to fill that plate with salad and potatoes and corn bread and wojape. When I reached the end of that food line, Jenny Hunt stood there giving me a look I had never seen before. She asked, "Rev. Allen, where's your wateche pot?"

I looked back at her with one of those glazed looks that says, 'I don't know what you're talking about.' She repeated, "Your wateche pot! You know, for taking some food for the road home." Jenny Hunt was teaching me about hospitality. You see, in those parts, people came for many miles to attend a funeral or a wedding or a naming ceremony. And the host wouldn't think of sending you some empty-handed. Jenny Hunt provided me with a make-shift wateche pot. After that, I brought my own! She was my teacher that day. And to this day, I lift up the enduring value of generous hospitality as a mission of any local church. On that day, she was the Canaanite woman who knew what she believed and wouldn't rest until I had learned my lesson. She believed that faith has something to do with radical hospitality. Her faith shaped mine.

I often think of how this encounter with the Canaanite woman's faith impacted Jesus. Matthew, our Gospel writer, surely wanted this story to impact the early church people. He wanted them to understand that faith is no respecter of nationality or race or denomination or gender or anything else. And that we

We are all richer when we open ourselves to the faith of our neighbors, the ones who look and sound like us, and the ones who don't. It's when we allow ourselves to be impacted by the faith of the unlikely ones, the faith of the Canaanite woman, the faith of MacKinley Hackett, the faith of Jenny Hunt, that we realize we're living in the greatest of hope. Amen