

Message
August 13-14, 2011
Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Matthew 15:21-28
Persistence

There is the story of a man, upon awakening one morning, becomes acutely aware of the day bursting open with a choir of birds singing, and the brightness of the morning sun gently caressing him and guiding him to a newness and appreciation for who his is and how he is in the world. The man is a highly successful public speaker, and a well published author. Now, this doesn't sound like a particularly exciting story. Except this man lives with the challenge of a debilitating disease that seriously compromises his mobility and his brain power. So, the man calls his brother and asks him to come over. At this stage of his illness, he has lost the use of his fine motor skills and is unable to use his hands to write. He needs his brother to help him. You, see, the man decides he wants to be persistent. With his brother's help, he composes a list of "Do Haves" and "Don't Haves". Under the man's instruction, the brother writes the "Do Haves" list: Loving caring family, a resilient nature, intelligence, loyal friends, charisma, strong character, medical support, opportunities, compassion, commitment, courage, and hope. Under the "Don't Haves" list, he dictates the following: perfect health, mobility, a career as he knew it. Not surprisingly, the "don't haves" list is a lot shorter than the "do haves" list. So, he decides he has a choice to make in his persistency. He can live and act on the "do haves" list or sink and die under the "don't haves" list. Then and there, the man chooses the former; with commitment, faith, conviction and sheer persistence, deciding that acting on the "do haves" is a lot better than suffering under the "don't haves".

This is exactly how it is for the Canaanite woman we meet today as she confronts Jesus. Despite her lengthy "don't haves" list, she's persistent in her "do haves" and acts on them with a mighty force that brings Jesus to attention. Now, her "don't haves" list is long. She doesn't have the right genealogy, doesn't have a husband; doesn't have a healthy child; doesn't have the support of her community; doesn't have her dignity. Matthew's writer names her a Canaanite. In Jesus' time, no one calls the land, Canaan now. In fact, to refer to the area as Canaan would be something like calling New York, Amsterdam, today. Actually, in Jesus' time the region is Syro-Phoenicia, today known as Lebanon, and has not been referred to as Canaan since the Exodus of the Old Testament.

Mark's gospel refers to the woman as Greek; a pagan worshiper; an enemy of the Israelites, certainly an outsider. Israel has a blended history of hostility and heritage toward this woman's culture, disapproving of its pagan worship, the oppression of those less fortunate, and blatant, inappropriate sexual behaviors; at the same time, enculturating religious festivals, language and practices. There's some possibility the woman is a prostitute. After all, it appears she doesn't have a husband or a man to represent her, as is the custom; therefore greatly compromising her status. As a Canaanite, woman, alone, on the street, the woman is a threat to all that is pure and right and just to Israel. She's an outsider, an outcast, unclean, not worthy enough to eat the crumbs on the ground fallen from the table. Under no circumstances should she be included. The disciples want nothing to do with her. In fact, they'd prefer Jesus simply placate her, give her what she

wants to get rid of her. She's persistent, this outcast, and will not be deterred and focuses on her "do-haves".

She "does have" a daughter she loves deeply. She "does have" responsibility she takes very seriously. She "does have" endless persistence. Most of all, she "does have" trust, faith, in Jesus Christ to lead her through. Her faith emboldens her. Knowing that Jesus is not likely to come to the home of a Gentile, Canaanite, pagan, she leaves her stricken daughter behind, and makes her way to meet him. The woman is also smart, stubborn and feisty. And, right now, she's going to get what she wants, what she needs. She trusts in Jesus. But, my guess is, it's her maternal instinct that is driving her persistence to find healing strength for her suffering daughter. Cause, that's what we do when we're desperate for our children, don't we? We will do whatever we must do to prevent their suffering, relieve their pain. Jesus is her answer.

Upon greeting Jesus, she pleads, and shouts, declaring his rightful title, "Son of David." She tells Jesus what he needs to hear to get what she wants. "Lord, Son of David," is a term of entitlement from faithful Jews to a Jewish rabbi; not the address generally given from a pagan. Her pious overture does not show Jesus in the best light. First, he ignores the impertinent woman. He says nothing. Then, the disciples, annoyed, heighten the anxiety. The truth is, the disciples are just trying to do their job. Way back in chapter 10 when Jesus was giving them their job descriptions, he told them, don't go around in Gentile territory, go instead to the lost sheep of Israel. Don't waste your time with folks out there. We've got enough people in our own neighborhood to take care of. In the world of the Israelites, Jesus comes to save those chosen by God, the lost sheep of Israel, and she is not. The woman is heedless of their warnings. Relentless, persistent in action and word, desperate, she humbles herself, and begs Jesus to help her. Bowing in prayer, she begs, "help me." Jesus' response: an exclusive, closed door, cruel rebuff... "it's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs." It's not good.

Let's make excuses for Jesus. Over these past days, he's learned the tragic news of his dear companion, John the Baptist's brutally beheaded at the whim of a dancing girl. He's traveled around the Sea of Galilee, fed the 5,000, walked on the water to calm a storm and saved sinking Peter. He's crossed the Sea again, dealt with some pretty persistently difficult Pharisees challenging his disciples and him about following God's law. Now, he's withdrawn to the region of Tyre and Sidon; Gentile territory. These folks aren't so likely to pursue Jesus. After, all, he's after the children of Israel. What Jesus "doesn't have" right now is, rest, retreat, relaxation. He's just plum worn out. He's got to draw the line somewhere. We all have to draw the line somewhere, right? At some point, we have to decide to stop giving, stop helping, stop trying to make a difference, right? Or not? Isn't that what Jesus is doing? Taking a rest from compassion and love, so he doesn't have burn out? Not likely.

It seems the Canaanite woman hopes to get in under the radar. Maybe just one last miracle from Jesus, before he settles on the coastal shores, enjoying the beauty of the Mediterranean Sea for some much deserved vacation time. She's not letting him get away and will not take "no" for an answer. It's going to take a lot more than a few insults from Jesus for her to back down. She knows, regardless of how Jesus is responding to her today, his never failing, miraculous love crosses all boundaries, reaches

well beyond the moment, and his compassion is endless. He has the power to save her daughter from misery and she's willing to scrape and crawl to get it. So, she acts on her "do have's"; her perseverance, persistence, passion to live and walk in the healing power of God in Christ. She has faith. It is her faith that pushes her past Jesus' humanity to his divinity. Now, though, she's getting weary. Persistence has two sides, exhilaration and exhaustion. Humbly dropping to the ground, kneeling at his feet, broken in worry and despair, in all truth and sincerity, desperate beyond measure, the woman utters the words, "help me."

Jesus pushes back one more time: "it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the little dogs." Dogs roam the streets, eating whatever scraps they can find. They are unclean, untrained, scavengers, and wild, often ridden with sickness and disease. To soften matters, the word used here in Greek is *kunaria*, puppy dogs, house pets, not the strays rummaging the mounds of dirt and disease on the streets. Matthew's writer is making every effort to show Jesus' compassion. But, the truth is, it's a derogatory slur. This is not Jesus' best moment. The woman rallies, not to be swayed by the insult. She tosses back, "Just give me a scrap of your grace and mercy," she begs. The persistent "do have's" win in the end. Jesus makes a complete turn around. We must have Jesus. And, Jesus must have us...to believe in him; to trust in him; especially when things don't look like they're going our way. "Help me," she begs. "Help me," is what Jesus hears and he awakens to her need. "You have great faith..." May these be the words we all hear from Jesus when we come face to face. It's her faith that saves her. Persistent faith.

This is not the first time we hear these words from Jesus. Throughout his Galilean ministry Jesus is persistent in witnessing the claim of faith...The blind man sitting on the side of the road, begs Jesus to show compassion. Jesus says, "Your faith has saved you." Ten leper victims cry out to Jesus, "take pity on us." Jesus heals all ten. One turns back in gratitude. "Your faith has saved you," Jesus claims. The hemorrhaging woman, touching Jesus' robe is cured. Jesus responds, "your faith has saved you; go in peace." A woman, ridden with sin, wipes the feet of Jesus with her tears, her kisses and precious oils. Jesus, says, "your faith has saved you; go in peace." A Centurian soldier begs for Jesus to heal his faithful servant. "not even in Israel have I found faith as great as this."

And today,...the Canaanite woman persists in her healing relationship with Jesus. Back and forth they banter. She's an outcast, not in, a boundary crasher, in a territory known for animosity toward the faithful, law abiding Israelites. She has many "do not have's". And yet, it's in our "do have's" where Jesus' miracle of healing is revealed. "Woman, you have great faith," says Jesus, "let your desire be granted." And, her daughter is healed.

We all have our list of "do have's", right? One of my "do have's" is the abundant love and respect for you as Christ Church. And, over these next weeks, as we're saying our farewells as I prepare to take my post at St. Thomas, Whitemarsh, near Philadelphia, I can share with you, that I'm trusting in the "do have's;" that God's saving, loving, redeeming grace works wonders. Many have asked how best we can celebrate this time; how to say good bye. I'd like to suggest a practice that we learn from the Canaanite woman and especially from Jesus. Let's honor God's blessings and praise God. Let's be persistent in our faith and show it in our actions. I'd like to present to you a faith

challenge over these next weeks: Be faith in action, Christ Church. SERVE. Help those who won't be helped. Share your resources. Give generously of your time talent and treasure.

Christ Church is rich with opportunities to serve. Some immediate ways to serve are with our young friends with George Mason Elementary School. Provide them with new backpacks filled with supplies for the school year. Serve as a classroom aid or a mentor. Labor Day Weekend is the first weekend of the month, when we always remember to bring food for the Central Virginia Food Bank. Your gifts of canned food, and your dollars change the lives of thousands throughout the greater Richmond area. In November, once again, Christ Church will be hosting CARITAS. CARITAS guests are the first to comment on the generosity of time, talent and treasure extended to them when they are here. Everyone can spend time with CARITAS. Remember our friends in Haiti; another trip is pending for January of 2012. In a few weeks the students and teachers of Hope and Resurrection School in South Sudan will return to their studies, growing and learning as leaders of a new, independent South Sudan. They need your help. Sign up to revitalize our playground and work next Saturday. Learn by teaching our children in Kid's Quest and chapel, and our youth in small groups. Be trained as a Lay Eucharistic Minister, a reader, a prayer minister, an acolyte, an usher, an altar guild server, a tech booth minister, the music ministry, and help in leading worship.

Christ Church, this is what we do. We serve as a sign of Jesus' faith in us. So, I challenge us to serve. Serve, give and give generously. Then, tell me about your service. Send me an email, here or in Philadelphia, and let me hear about how you're fulfilling your faith challenge. The greatest gift you can give me is the story of how you stepped out and gave of yourself because of your belief in Jesus Christ as Christ Church. Christ Church, you are a beacon of love and hope in our neighborhood. Don't limit yourself. Be persistent in your faith. In you Jesus is revealed. In you is great faith. In you is the list of "do haves": love, compassion, time, talent, treasure, bold belief, trust and a great willingness to be Jesus. Be astonished at what you do and what you can do. Great is your faith!! Let it be done for you as you wish.