

THE LONG DISTANCE CONNECTION OF FAITH

Scriptures: Matthew 8:5-13, Matthew 15:21-28

There is an old Peanuts comic strip where Snoopy is sitting on top of his dog house reading the Bible to Woodstock, the little bird. Interestingly, he is reading from the Gospel of Matthew. He reads, “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Fear not: you are of more value than many sparrows.” Woodstock let’s out a chirp in the form of an exclamation point, as if to say, “Huh?” Then Snoopy continues, “Look at the birds of the air. Are you not of more value than they?” This time Woodstock emits a question mark, as if to say, “What?” In the last frame Snoopy says, “Woodstock gets kind of disturbed by some of these scriptures.”

You might have been disturbed by that last scripture reading, especially if you are a Canaanite, or maybe even a woman. In fact it disturbed me when Jesus responds to this Canaanite woman begging help by referring to her as a dog.

Most commentaries on this story, as well as most commentaries on our first scripture lesson, focus on Jesus’ relationship to foreigners. We know from Matthew chapter 1 that Jesus is the promised Messiah, a descendent of King David, sent to be the Savior of the Jews. But what about the people of other countries? Is Jesus sent also for them? Both our scriptures today would say yes. Jesus heals the Roman officer’s servant, and, after a little persuasion, he also heals the daughter of the Canaanite woman. Jesus came not just for the Jews but for Gentiles, which means he came for us! Both scriptures make that clear.

But every one of Jesus’ healings in the Gospel of Matthew has a twist, and here is the big twist in both of these scripture readings for today. It is not only that Jesus heals foreigners. That is certainly one twist in the story, but that is not the only twist nor even the most surprising twist. The big twist in both cases—both in the story of the Roman centurion and in the story of the Canaanite woman—in both cases Jesus heals someone not because of their own faith but because of someone else’s faith.

Take a pew Bible and turn back to the beginning of Matthew chapter 8, starting at verse 1 (NT, p. 7). It says, “When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him saying, ‘Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.’” Now there is a person with faith. The man with leprosy comes to Jesus believing that he can heal him, and Jesus does.

Turn the page to Matthew chapter 9, and look at verse 27. It says, “As Jesus went on from there, two blind men followed him, crying loudly, ‘Have mercy on us, Son of David!’”, almost the same words as the Canaanite woman. The story continues in verses 28-29: “When he entered the house, the blind men came to him; and Jesus said to them, ‘Do you believe that I am able to do this?’ They said to him, ‘Yes, Lord.’ Then he touched their eyes and said, ‘According to your faith let it be done to you.’” Both of these people confessed their faith in Jesus, and as a result they were healed.

But in today's scripture readings it is not the sick person who comes to Jesus believing in his power to heal. It is someone who cares about them. We don't know if the servant in the first scripture lesson believes in Jesus or even knows about Jesus. But the centurion does, and that is enough. Likewise in the second scripture. We don't know if the woman's daughter knows of Jesus or believes in him, but the woman does, and her intercessions are enough.

Which brings me to the second big surprise, the second big twist in these stories. In both cases Jesus heals as a distance. In the story I read about the man with leprosy, the man comes to Jesus, Jesus touches him, and he is healed. The same thing is true in the case of the blind men. Jesus touches their eyes and they are healed. In both of these stories touch Jesus is important. I will say more about that next week. But in today's scripture readings that is not important. In both scripture readings for this week Jesus goes wireless. He heals people at a distance.

And that brings me to the biggest, most surprising twist of all. The first people to realize that Jesus can do this, the first people to believe that Jesus can heal someone at a distance are foreigners, despised foreigners at that: a Canaanite woman and a Roman soldier.

Here is where the theme of the foreigner comes in. It is the foreigners, the ones who are not part of the "in-group," who are not among the chosen people, who understand the length of Jesus' reach. They are the ones who recognize what Jesus can do for the person not present, for the person who cannot come to him or does not want to come to him or does not believe in him enough to come. Jesus can work in that person too, not because of their own faith but because of the faith of the person who cares for them.

This helps explain why we baptize a children in our church. People who come to our church from non-Presbyterian churches sometimes wonder why we baptize young children. After all, it is not the child who confesses faith. It is not the child who stands up here and answers the question: Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? It is the parent or parents who answer that question. How can we baptize children because of the faith of their parents?

Ask the Canaanite woman. Ask the Roman centurion. Jesus can work at a distance. Jesus can work in the life of the person who cannot bring herself to Jesus or who may not even want to come to Jesus. Jesus can work in that person's life too, not because they ask for it but because we do.

In the December issue of *Presbyterians Today* there was a story called "Faithfulness across generations." It was a series of short testimonies written by people whose parents or grandparents had made a difference in their lives. Here is one of them. This was written by a woman named Ellen Acton from Southfield, MI.

In my 20s I rebelled against my parents and the church. I became an atheist and embraced humanistic philosophy. My mother argued that only Jesus could save the world. I argued back that people used religion as a crutch. After a while she just said she was praying for me. I said she was wasting her time. This went on for 10 years.

Then I got divorced. Mom had been taking my daughter to Sunday School, and I started going to church too, just to have something to do. One Sunday I heard the good news that “in Jesus Christ” we are forgiven. I prayed, “O God, if you’re real, come into my heart. I need your forgiveness.” Later I opened the Bible and began to read. The words seemed to jump off the pages and into my heart. After a few weeks I went to my mother and thanked her for all those prayers.

I was ordained to the ministry in 1987. My prayer life has been modeled after that of my mother—persevering and faithful. She helped give me life twice!

This story reminds me of the Canaanite woman. The impressive thing about the Canaanite woman was her persistence. Even when Jesus seemed to say no—he did not actually say no—but even when he seemed to say no, she kept on trying.

And you think Jesus won’t listen to your prayers for your children, for your family members, for your neighbors or coworkers or friends who need the healing, the forgiveness, or the new life Jesus came to bring? Jesus can work at a distance, and it does not even take faith on the part of the person he is healing, it only takes yours.

- Ken Onstot
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