

Increasingly it seems, faith is falling out of fashion. People in general might be OK with a generic spirituality – you know, where folks claim to be “religious” but claim no specific beliefs or practices or truths. But nowadays a person with true, biblical, Christian faith is seen as someone who is not very logical or smart. A person with true, biblical, Christian faith is assumed to be intolerant, someone who has a closed mind.

It is said that faith is blind, faith is irrational, faith is for the foolish and unscientific mind. For now, you are free to exercise your faith at home or here at church, but don't you dare to speak biblical truths anywhere else. That is why many politicians have made the subtle shift of language from “freedom of religion” (as the Constitution puts it) to something different, “freedom of worship.” Worship is something that government can limit to home and church. Religion on the other hand encompasses your whole life in this world.

The only publicly acceptable form of faith today is that which is personal and subjective. If your faith leads you to make any judgments about what is actually true and false, about what is right and what is wrong for all people, you're better off not sharing those views publicly. If you express those things, then you open yourself up to being judged and ostracized and cancelled. How far this country has fallen from her roots.

But the culture's view of faith as mere private sentimentality is really a caricature and a distortion; it is not real, and it is not worth anything. Today we are given a picture of true faith – true Biblical Christian faith – in the account from Matthew's gospel about a woman whose daughter is sick and assaulted by a demon. We are not told all the details, which leads us to wonder, for instance, why this woman came alone. Where was her husband? Where were her friends? Is she the only one left who has any hope left in God to help her daughter? Of course, we don't know these things; they are not revealed in Scripture. But what we do know is that this woman is extraordinarily persistent.

So, let us review the story. A woman of Canaan came from that region and cried out to Jesus, saying, ***“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David! My daughter is severely demon-possessed.”*** ***But He answered her not a word.*** That stonewalling may well have been enough to cause us to be embarrassed and to give up. But this woman continues to press Jesus for help. She keeps on crying out for mercy, and the disciples are scandalized. Why won't Jesus help? He always helps. So they intercede on her behalf. ***“Send her away,”*** they say; which means “Release her,” help her, give her what she asks for so that she will go away.”

But Jesus replies that He was not sent to help Gentiles, only Jews: ***“I was not sent except to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*** Today’s social justice warriors would call him a racist, among other less-than-charitable things. But this woman does not call Jesus names; instead, she prostrates herself before Jesus, worshiping Him, saying, ***“Lord, help me!”***

This is an act that flies directly in the face of the sinful nature which does not want to admit that it needs help. This woman completely humbles herself and throws herself at the mercy of Christ. That should do it; she’s going to get help now for sure.

But then Jesus proceeds to call her a dog. How unkind, we would say. That kind of unfavorable response likely would have been the breaking point for you or me. And as for Jesus, well the world would label Him a patriarchal sexist and tell us that we are justified in abandoning our hope in Him.

But strangely, this woman does not grumble or complain or slink away defeated and rejected. Quite to the contrary, she agrees with Jesus. “Yes, Lord; indeed I am a dog, but at least dogs get scraps from the table.” This woman has Jesus trapped in His own words and demands that He throw her a bone and help her and her daughter. In many ways she is like a dog

with its teeth clamped onto one of those pull toys, and she is not going to let go. She clings to Jesus with all her strength.

And this is what Jesus wanted and was working toward all along. He said to the woman, **“O woman, great is your faith!”** And what is this faith that He commends? We have a clue in what she calls Him: **“Son of David.”** She knows who Jesus is. She has listened to the reports about Him. Doubtless she has heard accounts of how many people Jesus has healed, how He has fed thousands, how He has made the lame to walk and the blind to see. She has heard the word about the Word made flesh. Her confidence is in the Word which she has heard about Jesus. And by calling Him **“Son of David,”** she reveals her trust in the Scriptural promises about a Son of that great king who would reign forever and bring peace.

This woman’s faith is not blind; it is not irrational; it is biblical and it is solid. Faith, in the words of the Letter to the Hebrews, is **“the essence/ substance of things hoped for, the proof or conviction of things not seen.”** Her faith is not in what she hopes for – the healing of her daughter; but rather her faith is in the One who can give her what she hopes for and is confident that He will do it.

Way too often faith is talked about as if our believing is the main thing. You know, if you just believe hard enough, then you will get what you hope

for. And if you do not believe hard enough you are not a very good Christian and, then, you are not going to be healed. If you do not believe hard enough you will not get what you want. But that is nothing more than just putting your faith in your own faith. This “faith” then does not trust God nor does it look to Him for help; it trusts in itself. That is the huge problem with all these “name it and claim it” preachers who blaspheme the name of God and the one true faith by pointing people to themselves.

But true, biblical Christian faith is not about you; it is about the One in whom you believe. The Canaanite woman’s faith is great because it is faith in Jesus. Her faith is not in herself or her feelings; her faith is in the Word, in the message about Jesus.

Very often faith goes against what you are feeling, and you should not be surprised to hear that. In fact, faith is really not at all about feelings. What this woman is experiencing in Jesus’ responses is contrary to what she has heard. But her faith, her confidence in what she has heard about Jesus, overrides what she is currently experiencing. And that, I suspect, is the point behind this whole episode. It is a hard lesson to learn; it is difficult to learn patience and humility and to have confidence in the Word, and to hold onto it tightly. It is a lesson that we all must continually learn until we draw our final breath.

Faith is not irrational; faith is not blind; it always has an object. True faith begins with confidence in what has already been said and done in and by Christ. What has happened in our language is a redefinition of faith which reduces it to mere experiences, emotions, and ideas that dwell entirely in the realm of the subjective. That is why it is so common to hear about “faith communities” and “people of faith” across all religions and philosophies. But we reject that kind of talk because it makes every kind of faith equally valid, and it leads to a kind of spiritual mush where all beliefs and spiritualities are thought of as simply different flavors of the same ice cream, or different paths which all lead to the same destination.

Looking back to early Christian history, the Roman Empire was brilliant in this regard. When they conquered a new people, the local deity went into the pantheon and became part of the group of gods that were offered worship. All gods were acceptable just as long as you paid homage to the Roman ones and to Caesar, too. Very interestingly, many of the early Christian martyrs were considered atheists, which sounds strange to our ears. But they were called “atheists” not for believing in the pantheon of the Roman gods, but believing only in one God, who could not be seen and who wasn’t worshiped by means of a visible idol or statue.

For instance, St. Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John and one of the early Christian martyrs, when he was given an opportunity to escape being thrown to the wild beasts, he was told by the proconsul to say, “Away with the atheists,” meaning away with the Christians. But the bishop calmly looked out on the pagan crowd and instead said of them, “Away with the atheists.” For there is one God alone who is to be worshiped, and one faith alone that can save, **“for there is only one Mediator between God and men, the man Jesus Christ”** (I Tim 2:5).

So it does not matter if a Muslim believes fervently, or a Hindu, or a Mormon. It is not the quality of the faith but the quality of the object of faith that matters. What counts is what faith believes and trusts in. The object of faith for us Christians is, of course, Christ Jesus. Faith in anything else may be well-intentioned and fervent, but it’s object is false and untrustworthy.

The greatness of the woman’s faith in today’s Gospel, then, was not merely an inner quality of persistence; heck, anyone can be persistent in his or her error. Hers was not mere optimism, either; for one can whistle happily while waltzing right into disaster. No, the greatness of the woman’s faith was in the greatness of the object: her confidence was entirely in Christ Jesus, that He was, in fact, merciful. She trusted in that mercy that she had heard about; she trusted in that Word and she would not let go.

You can have strong and fervent faith that you will beat your cancer, or that you will get the job you want, or that you can finally meet that person of your dreams. But a strong faith is no guarantee that you will get these things. For that matter, neither is a failed outcome a sign of a lack of faith on your part.

No, dear friends; as Christians our faith is entirely in one thing, what the woman asked for today: God's mercy in Christ; God's kindness, pity, and rescue. And the foundation of our faith is entirely built upon Christ Jesus, His life, His death, and His resurrection. He is the One who cried out to His Father on the cross and was answered not a word, in order that your prayers would always be heard. He was forsaken in His suffering so that you would never be. He is the One who was treated like an unwanted street dog, whipped and beaten, in order to deliver you from the eternal punishment your sins deserve. And He is the One who continued to cling to His Father and to entrust Himself into His hands even in death, and who was vindicated in the resurrection and exalted for His great faith and faithfulness – all for you and on your behalf.

To trust in this crucified and risen Jesus is not blind or irrational; for who He is and what He has done is testified to by many eyewitnesses. It is

credible. You are not a fool to believe it, but wise beyond measure, for it is the one thing above all other things that matters.

So, dear fellow redeemed, do not fret if the foolish and unbelieving world counts you a fool or a bigot for clinging to Christ and His Word.

Rather rejoice, for the Lord remembers you when you are weak and lowly and despised. He shows you the greatest mercy, not just throwing you crumbs but giving you a place at the table and feeding you with the very Bread of Life, His true body and blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

O woman, O Church of Christ, great is your faith, because great is your Jesus. Let it be to you as you have desired. Amen.