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### WHERE DO YOU FIND FAITH?

How do Christians view those who come to church but who seem not to know how to follow along in the service?

- It's not uncommon to view them as being in some ways less than us.
  - They probably don't have the faith we have.
  - They likely don't know as much about the Bible or GOD or JESUS as we do.
    - They are maybe even people who don't really belong here.

And what about those whose clothing tells us they clearly are not real church goers?

- Do we view them with a degree of caution?
- Do we see them as ones who may be looking for something other than to worship?
  - After all, if they were really people of faith, they would know how to dress for worship.

Or what about people who speak differently from most of us?

Or who clearly live differently from most of us?

Or who obviously have different backgrounds from the rest of us?

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It seems that something like this is going on in the gospel reading for today.

- JESUS tries to get away for some needed rest, so HE goes to a different region from where HE had been teaching and healing, and HE enters a house.
  - (By the way, in JESUS' day going into someone's home was not that uncommon.
    - Hospitality to visitors, even strangers, was a priority and people could simply ask for and be given a place to stay at night.)
- But JESUS can't seem to get away. A woman comes to see HIM and ask for some help.

Note that she is labeled: a woman, Greek, born in Syrian Phoenicia.

We often do the same: "He was a black man with gang tattoos."

- "She was a Middle Easterner wearing a hijab (*he'-jaab*)."
  - "He was a Latino who spoke little English."
  - "She was a lesbian from northern California."
    - Nobody says, "She was a heterosexual white woman born in Whittier,"
      - because she would be "normal" or like everyone else here.
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Yet it is important to the story that we know these things because they tell us that she does not fit in with the main group.

- She is a Greek, meaning that she is a Gentile—a non-Jew.
- She is from Syrian Phoenicia, so she is not an Israelite.
- And she is a woman, who shouldn't even be speaking to a man without invitation, unless it is her husband.

No wonder JESUS seems so cold to her:

- "*First, let the children eat all they want, for it is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to their dogs.*"
  - The children HE is referring to are the children of Israel—the Jews.
  - And the inclusion of the term, "dogs," is an ethnic slur made toward someone who was inferior because of nationality and background.

Typical behavior, right?

- But not for JESUS! This is not the type of response you'd expect from JESUS.
  - And this is not the response we want to hear when we consider all the ways that we are not the kind of people with whom the SON OF GOD should be concerned.
    - What's going on here?

Some suggest that JESUS is just testing her to see if her faith is real.

- The problems, though, with this theory are:
    - first, the story doesn't mention testing,
    - second, nothing like this occurs elsewhere in the gospels,
    - and third, this paints a picture of GOD as ONE who is taunting and teasing another in her deepest moments of need.
  - You may recall from last year when this story came up in Matthew's gospel that I proposed that JESUS' words were directed, not toward her, but toward HIS disciples.
    - Though not mentioned here, the disciples surely are with JESUS.
    - And they are notorious for sending people away from JESUS, especially those whom they deem to be unworthy of HIM.
  - So perhaps JESUS is testing them as to what response HE should make to her and using some sarcasm as part of this testing.
    - *(sarcastically) "It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs?"*
    - *"Is that what you want ME to say, MY followers?"*
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In any case, this passage is important for us, first, because it is deeply about the question, "Where do you find faith?" and it challenges us to rethink how we view others and ourselves as people of faith.

- And the answers we can find to that question begin with considering the power of the stranger.

As I've already pointed out, strangers are newcomers and folks who are different.

- And when these people show up in our community, they stretch our perspectives, often in positive ways.
  - They can teach us things about themselves, about the world, and about ourselves—but only if we are willing to listen.
  - And while we may meet people who are as bold—or desperate—as the woman in this story, if we open ourselves to them, we can discover newer and broader perspectives to the breadth of GOD's creation.
    - They may offer us insights to their need for hope, and by doing so, show us our own.
    - They may sit at the margins of community, hungering for a sense of belonging, and thereby name our own need to fit in.
    - They may force themselves into our midst in ways that are distressing and pained, and uncomfortably remind us of those times in our lives when we felt the same.
    - They will confront us with the dilemma of whether to reach out to them and convince them that we care about their thoughts and needs,
      - or to simply send them away so that we don't have to deal with the discomfort they bring our way.
- Strangers force us to consider the prickly questions of:
  - "Who are we overlooking?"
  - "Who is part of our fellowship, but often not participating?"
  - "Who does not sit at the center, ever?"
  - "Who is not fully included, but who might have a great deal to teach us?"

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The second thing this woman offers is regarding the nature of faith that has to do with being worthy of GOD.

This woman—this stranger—might have seemed to those around JESUS completely undeserving of what JESUS had to offer,

- and that she is even contemptible for approaching HIM.
  - Yet JESUS praises her to those around HIM for her reply to HIS dismissive words,
    - and then grants her audacious and ridiculous request.

It may be tempting to see this story as one of self-empowerment,

- of a woman who not only believes in JESUS but also in herself.

But I'm not sure that's the case at all.

- I don't know what this woman believed.
- I don't know if she believed herself worthy of GOD's attention and JESUS' time.
  - But I do know that she believed that her daughter was!
    - She was convinced that her precious, beloved daughter who was being oppressed by this unclean spirit, was absolutely deserving of JESUS' attention.
      - So, she was willing to go to great lengths to help her,
        - even to the point of asking and arguing with famous TEACHER and HEALER.

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How many of us, though feeling a sense of unworthiness toward GOD, have nevertheless stepped into the breach on behalf of another?

- That's what we do when we offer prayers to GOD in the name of someone else.
- We are bringing to GOD someone whom we believe is precious and beloved and deserving of GOD's attention.
  - And as we do, we also bring ourselves, claiming in faith that we, too, are indeed worthy of GOD,
    - because of the attention of JESUS to our needs, most fully shown in the crucifixion.
  - We claim and even acknowledge that we are worthy of GOD, not because of anything we have done, but only because of the faith we have found at the foot of the cross.

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I think that's often the case with faith.

- It shows itself most fully when exercised on behalf of others, which, in turn, can only be done in community.
  - Faith is a hard thing to maintain in isolation.

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There is a story about a pastor who went to visit a man who had been absent from the church for some time.

- On a snowy winter evening, they sat in front of the fire in the man's living room.
  - The pastor let the man know that he was missed and that the church needed him.
  - He told the man of the importance of worship and fellowship for maintaining a healthy faith, but to no avail. \- The man explained that he had his Bible and that he could pray.
    - He felt that this was all he needed to keep his faith alive.
    - He simply didn't need the church.
- Finally, the pastor took the tongs from beside the fireplace and reached into the fire to remove a coal.
  - He set the coal at the foot of the fireplace apart from the fire burning inside.
  - As the two men sat there silently watching the coal, it slowly diminished in its heat and light and finally went out.
- The man quietly looked at his pastor and said, "Reverend, I'll see you Sunday."

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We are not created to be isolated beings,

- but rather to find our true selves, as people of faith, most deeply in community, in relationships, and when we are advocating for others.
  - Have you ever thought specifically about what this community means to your faith?
  - Have you ever considered what coming here does for the continued burning of the fire of faith in your life,
    - and, for that matter, what does your presence here mean for the faith life of others?
- It is here that we find faith—in ourselves and in others.
- It is here that we nurture and grow in our belief and in our trust of JESUS.
- It is here that we come to HIM in all our unworthiness, and yet by faith, seek out and speak out, asking for what only HE can provide.
- It is here that we come to know the truth of that saying:
  - *Faith is not believing that GOD can. It's knowing that GOD will.*
- And it is from here that we are sent out to live faith and to find faith in the community around us.

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Faith is found when we find those people around us who need our advocacy and care.

Congregational renewal does not come from figuring out what hymns we want to sing, what programs we most want, or what pastor we really deserve.

- Rather, congregational revitalization comes when we look around us, to our households, schools, workplaces, neighborhoods, communities, and world,
  - to discern who needs us,
  - to discover what they need from us,
  - and to design how we might use our resources to be their advocates before GOD and the world.

Elsewhere in Mark's Gospel, JESUS says that only those who give away their lives will find it.

- I think that's true, both in our individual lives and in our life as a congregation.

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Where do you find faith?

- Hopefully you find it here, every time you come.
- Hopefully you find it in your life, every time you present yourself before GOD, trusting that your worthiness to do so comes from your belief in the ONE who gave HIS life for you.
- Hopefully, too, you find it in the stranger, in the marginalized, in the ones who need us to approach GOD on their behalf.
- And hopefully find it in sharing the insights GOD has granted you as you invite others to come,
  - to be part of a wonderful community that invites and brings and welcomes all who come,
    - to learn of the self-sacrificing and life-giving Gospel of our LORD JESUS CHRIST,
      - the ONE who did and does and who always will welcome, well, everyone.