

Matthew 15:21-28

Faith in Action

I have someone in my life that is an Edmonton Elks fan. Now for those of you who do not follow the Canadian Football League or CFL for short, you would not be aware that up until Thursday of this past week the Elks had not won a game all season. On top of that, the Edmonton Elks set the all-time North American professional sports record with 21 consecutive home game losses. Now to be a fan of the Elks is to have faith, well that or hope. The comment I heard the morning after the win on Thursday was "Maybe they can win the next nine games and split the season with nine wins and nine losses." Now that is someone with both faith and hope!

Even if one is not a religious person you will hear of people putting their faith in someone or something. Someone who supports a particular political party or leader is putting their faith into the person or the platform they or the party represent. We will tell people to have faith that everything will work out when they endeavour on a new path or are trying to work out a problem. Faith in this case is more in one-self or the workings of the universe than believing that God is with us.

The last couple of weeks of scripture readings has me wondering about faith as well. Last week the reading was about Jesus and Peter walking on water. Peter is doing pretty well until he gets distracted by the storm and winds around him and starts to sink. Jesus says to him "You of little faith why did you doubt?" In today's reading Jesus responds to the persistent actions of a Canaanite woman with the words, "Woman, great is your faith!"

Peter was a disciple who went on to do much work in the name of Jesus while the woman disappears into her world, fortunate to have her story shared at all in this male dominated world and as an outsider to the Jewish faith on top of that. The two stories have me pondering a couple of things but let me start with the question of faith. Actually, I have a lot of questions about faith. Many of which I have to say came from reading a commentary by Karoline Lewis, a professor at Luther Seminary in Minneapolis.

In the article she poses many questions starting with "Little faith or great faith? How do we tell the difference? What are the criteria? Who gets to decide?"¹ Much of my reflection today comes from her writing about faith. Think about how vague the word faith is. It seems to cover a lot of ground and so when we tell someone to have faith,

¹ [Karoline Lewis "Getting" Great Faith - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#) Accessed August 18, 2023.

what are we saying? As we consider the concept of faith, hear Lewis' questions again, "Little faith or great faith? How do we tell the difference? What are the criteria? Who gets to decide?"

We speak about faith as if we all should understand what that means, but faith is as individual as the person. One's faith is based in their understanding of God and their lived experience, so none of us is likely to have the same faith. As Christians we have faith in God, but how that is expressed and lived out is different for each one of us.

I think back to Peter and the story of walking on water. Jesus may have said that he had little faith, but that faith was enough for him to continue to live his life as a follower of Jesus and move others to live out their faith. He was a leader in the early church, a trusted and wise advisor. Was his "little faith" greater than the woman's "great faith?"

And thinking of the woman's faith, I share again more questions from Karoline Lewis as she ponders this scripture about the Canaanite woman...

Why is her faith great? Is it because she is persistent? So, if I am more persistent — and about what, I might ask — will my faith be greater? Is her faith great because she names her plight, she is honest, she names her need? Is her faith great because she asks for help? Is her faith great because she gets Jesus to change his mind? Is her faith great because she recognizes who Jesus is? Is her faith great because she thinks Jesus can do something to help her daughter? Is her faith great because she rebuts Jesus' proposed boundaries? And then is faith the willingness to go past these boundaries, set either by others or those we place on ourselves?²

These questions help one to recognize just how complex faith can be. There is no simple way to define faith. We talk about growing into our faith, and maybe it is because it takes lived experience to get a handle on what faith means to each of us as individuals. Being part of the church is in part the way we grow in faith as we learn, worship, and work together. Still, how each of us understands our faith is different even when we do these things together.

This is the struggle and the beauty of the Christian faith. Each of us can have faith, but how God works in and through that depends on you and your relationship with God. One of the gifts of faith is that God can take all of our unique ways of knowing and expressing faith and make a community of faith where our love and actions can grow others in faith and knowledge of God's work in the world.

It would seem that having little faith or great faith is not the question, but rather how we live out our faith that makes the difference. The story should also make us consider that faith is something that is open to everyone, from Peter, the trusted if impetuous disciple,

² Ibid.

to a woman outside the Jewish faith. A woman who was up against barriers of religious affiliation, culture, country, and gender.

There is much about this story that is truly disturbing. It portrays Jesus in a way that we can get downright angry about, from his choice to first ignore the woman shouting out at him to him basically calling her a dog. Addressing all of that would be another sermon or three. For Jesus, someone who saw the needs of thousands in a crowd and stopped to heal them and feed them to now have him ignore the cries of a mother searching for healing for her daughter, well it just doesn't jive. Still, in the end, her "great faith" as Jesus calls it... even if we can't define it...her great faith changes Jesus' response and the daughter was healed.

However, we define faith it appears that it is lived out in action rather than a static concept. Faith grows, deepens, moves people to try to get out of a boat and walk on water or shout to get the attention of a man who might be able to heal her daughter. We talk about stepping out in faith, growing in faith, living in faith. Faith is dynamic, changing, and experienced. It is for those in the church and for those who have never stepped foot in a church.

Faith is about relationship with God. Faith grows and fluctuates. At times it feels like a struggle and at others times it is the rock that we stand on. As you might have figured out by now, your faith is your faith and no one can judge it or measure it. Maybe the message today is to take the time to ponder your faith, where you are at, what you may like to do so that your faith continues to grow in ways that God can use you to make a difference in your home, with family, friends, or co-workers, with care givers and in community.

If nothing else this story about the Canaanite woman tells us that life is messy. Questions come up, we face resistance and challenge. We can be ignored and frustrated. We live out our faith in the messiness of life. Whether you feel you have little faith or great faith, know that God can work with that, loves you and desires a deeper relationship with you. May your own questions guide you to a deeper faith and give you courage to live your faith in service to God and others. Through Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.