

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8; Psalm 67;
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

You may not have heard of Todd and Lisa Beamer before September 11, 2001, but you may know of them now. Todd is one of the heroes who diverted the plane which crashed in Pennsylvania that fateful day. Lisa, his wife, was left with two small children and pregnant with their third child. She has since become a public figure and spokesperson, sharing her faith with the world. She has become a national symbol of faith and courage in troubled times.

In her writings, she tells us how their faith, which began in childhood, kept them strong. She says, "Todd and I both grew up in families where God wasn't just for Sundays but a part of our daily lives. We read about His truths in the Bible, and our parents modeled talking to God anytime, rather than waiting for a crisis moment." With this foundation, these ordinary people have demonstrated a great faith; however, Lisa will tell you that her husband was an ordinary man with an ordinary faith in a great God.

The faith that Craig, Sam and I have has carried us this far. My husband and I, too, had similar childhoods to that of Todd and Lisa, and we hope to impress those same values upon Sam. We were both blessed as children to have parents who served as role models. Our parents believed in keeping the Commandments. We honored God. We respected our parents. And we kept the Sabbath day as a holy day. I think we, too, are just ordinary people, with an ordinary faith, in a great God.

As we prepared to move east, many people asked us about our plans. Some of our answers were straight forward, and for others we simply responded, "We're not sure, but God has a plan". That was exciting for me; we put our trust in God as we journeyed from Stewartville, Minnesota, to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, where I would attend seminary. In 2006, we left our comfort zone and traveled to the unknown. We sold our home and most of our possessions, and then we drove a thousand miles, never hesitating for even a moment. We had little money, no jobs, no friends or family to meet us when we got there. We did, however, have one another. And we had our faith, a strong faith that would carry us through the peaks and valleys.

The woman in today's gospel has a great faith, especially considering she is a rural peasant, a Canaanite woman, non-Jewish, or pagan as some people would say. Now the term "pagan" is an offensive term used to deliberately insult someone who does not believe in the God of our Bible. Brian Stoffregen, a theologian and scholar, says this about the woman's faith: "She didn't walk on water. She didn't move a mountain. She probably never went to church in her life. And she most certainly had never read the Bible. So what's so great about her faith?"

It's true. We do not know much about this woman. We don't know what her childhood was like. But we do know that she had amazing faith and courage. We also know that she hurt deeply, and she ached deep inside because her daughter was tormented by a demon. Many of us,

whether we're parents or not, may be able to relate to watching a child suffer. It seems as if she cannot go on.

We also sense that she is traveling alone, which in those days was not acceptable behavior; only prostitutes and widows traveled alone. As she approaches this man (another forbidden act), she calls out to Jesus, a Jewish man (and this too, is not protocol – women did not speak to men in public, especially men of a different faith). Nevertheless, in her persistence, she pleads to Jesus to have mercy on her.

She is a Canaanite, and Matthew writes to a primarily Jewish audience, who may have been very aware of the hostilities between the Jews and the Canaanites since the time of Noah. Her ancestors, you see, bore a curse brought on by Ham, Noah's youngest son. After discovering his father's nakedness, Ham's firstborn was cursed (you can read Genesis 9 to recall the rest of the story, but I will tell you that Ham's firstborn son was named Canaan).

Even with these odds against her, she continues to make a spectacle of herself. She starts shouting! She cries out! The Greek word here is *krazo*, and it is the same word that was used in last week's gospel to describe the disciples. Originally the word *krazo* described the unpleasant sound of a raven. It eventually came to be referred to as any kind of screeching or screaming or crying out, implying that the sounds were not pleasant to hear. It is this terrified sound that the disciples make while in the boat and see Jesus walking towards them, thinking it is a ghost walking on the water. It is the tone of voice that Peter uses when he begins to sink, "Lord, save me!" It is also what this woman is doing when she cries out to Jesus. Hear her trembling voice as she cries out to the Lord, "Have mercy! Have mercy on me, Lord, son of David!"

The woman in today's gospel is afraid, yet her faith carries her through as she pleads for just a moment with Jesus. I must admit the gospel today is a difficult text to read. It's hard to understand why Jesus seems to shut out this woman, when he has never done that before. Or worse, why he calls her a dog.

But Jesus is not being cruel or distasteful. After some study and consideration, I believe Jesus may have let this hurtful tug-of-war with words and emotions continue because the disciples do not understand. In the gospel today, Jesus had to ask them, "Are you also still without understanding?" Another translation says, "Are you still so dull?" Jesus knows the disciples are not quite on board yet. They do not understand the depth and the width of God's mercy. They have not yet found the strength of their own faith. They always seem to need clarification. They want Jesus to settle their disputes.

We often read in the Bible how the Pharisees and disciples disagree with one another regarding the teaching of the Law. In the text today, they are more concerned about what is clean and what is unclean, what goes in the mouth rather than what comes out of the mouth. But Jesus' encouraging inward purity passionately proclaims, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart."

What comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart. What comes out of the mouth of this woman, comes from her heart as she puts all her trust in Jesus. The words that flow are reverent

and humble. She displays the ultimate servant's heart. Yes, this could be another teachable moment for the disciples. And what a contrast to last week's gospel, when Jesus had to say to Peter, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?" Peter, a picture of imperfection. As are we all.

We are imperfect human beings, so we can learn from this Canaanite woman. My family, through trial and error, reaches out to Jesus every day in faith, proclaiming on our lips what is truly in our hearts. But sometimes when we go through dark days of pain, feeling as if we cannot go on, it is then we grasp on to God's guiding hand to pull us out this despair. I believe that the relationship we have built over time with God helps us through these troubled times. God continues to strengthen our faith by showing us His ever abiding love.

We were blessed, my husband and I, to learn early on how to pray and trust God. But it's never too late to open relations with God, to strengthen that bond. I would like to think that I put all my trust in God, but I realize how much more I have to learn. There are still times when I am overwhelmed with life situations, thinking I am the one in control. It is then that I once again put my faith and trust in God.

I am amazed at people, like the woman in today's gospel, who endured all obstacles and stayed the course. I am amazed at people like Todd and Lisa Beamer who overpowered terrorists in the face of death, or continued to live midst the heartache and grieving and giving these three young children all her love and attention. Lisa will tell you the secret of finding God in the midst of pain is this: give more and more of yourself to God, and He will reveal more and more of Himself to you.

No matter who we are, where we come from, or what our relationship with God is today, we can pour out our hearts, giving more and more of ourselves and asking God to strengthen us so that we, too, may have great faith and courage. We may be ordinary people, but the faith we have comes from a great God.

Amen.