

The Power of Persistence¹

This whole episode comes down to the power of faith. Even Jesus is impressed by the Canaanite woman's persistence in knowing that healing was possible. And it is that iron confidence that wins the day. The little girl is healed. The more you look at the details of this lesson the more remarkable the Canaanite woman appears.

For starters, the child is demon-possessed. In a primitive culture that is unaware of microbes and genetics, to be stricken with a mental illness or a serious disease must have seemed like the whole evil empire had invaded your body in order to torment you. How many of us have been sick enough that we would have died had modern medicine not been available? Think how it felt for a disease like the bubonic plague, tuberculosis, mental depression, or schizophrenia to fall upon someone with no recourse to antibiotics or hospitalization. It would feel like the dark powers had laid a cold hand on you and intended to drag you into death. How many children had this mother witnessed succumbing to some dreaded disease? So, the basic situation is desperate.

The text notes that the woman was a Canaanite, which is to say she was not a Jew. Jewish men, namely Jesus and his disciples—traveling in non-Jewish territory north of Palestine

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would have had nothing to do with a Palestinian woman. Surely, this woman was aware of Jewish customs that kept a sharp separation between Jews and Gentiles.

Add to this Jesus' rather brusque attitude. Were you a little put off by Jesus' behavior towards this poor woman? He says he came only for "the lost sheep of Israel." Now, there is a theological point in not ministering to non-Jews. We want Jesus to be carrying out God's faithfulness and commitment to Israel. Wouldn't it ring hollow if God had promised to be Israel's god forever, and then coming in Jesus and starting a whole new religion among pagans without giving Jews half a chance?

So Jesus may not be as brusque as he appears. But the woman may not have known that subtlety. Even the disciples counsel Jesus to get rid of her. That's pretty impressive rejection!

There are a lot of hurdles that stand against this little kid getting better. But her mom persists. She even gives Jesus a snappy little comeback about the crumbs from the children's table spilling over for the family dog to lick up. This, by the way is the only instance when it isn't Jesus giving the clever comeback.

I like to think when the woman was so clever that a smile spread across Jesus' face and he thought, "You're good. You really get it. Your daughter is going to be just fine." And she was.

So what's going on here that we need to be aware of? We're looking here at what it means in a practical way to believe that the Kingdom of God had arrived. This woman recognized—even though she hadn't spent her life going to synagogue and studying the scriptures—that something huge had shifted in who was running the world. She saw in Jesus that evil forces no longer always had the last word. She knew enough or sensed enough or had an intuition that this man, this Jesus, was bringing in a whole new order. And with a sick kid, she needed to be released from the old order of dark power, sickness, and death.

So she went to Jesus and wasn't going to give him peace until her daughter was delivered from evil's grip. And that's exactly what happened. She got it! Jesus was impressed. That's faith.

You and I have the same opportunity. Jesus Christ has come into this world. With him has come a new governance of the world—the kingdom of God. That changes everything.

We know the Robin Hood legends. I think the last rendering of these ancient stories was the movie starring Kevin Costner. The premise is that the king, Richard, has gone off to fight in the Crusades. In the power vacuum, his evil brother, John, teams up with the Sheriff of Nottingham and they bully their way into power. The sheriff taxes and abuses the citizens. But Robin and his merry followers remain loyal to Richard and live trusting that he will return and restore justice and peace. Robin and his merry followers retreat into the forest and basically frustrate and defy the sheriff. In some of the stories King Richard comes back to Nottinghamshire—sometimes in disguise. But the key to the drama has to do with who has the real authority—John or Richard. Robin and his group live under the real, but hidden authority of Richard.

We're living the same adventure. The new order is breaking into the world. This was Jesus' central message. The old order—though it appears to hold sway—is defeated.

Think how many oppressive situations we accept that really being to the dethroned order. I'm thinking of our personal selfishness; our addictive or destructive behavior. I'm thinking of violence and dishonesty. I'm thinking of this idea that money and class really make the world go round. I'm thinking of our acceptance the extraordinary numbers of people

who must live in poverty. I'm thinking of the places of work that think a dog-eat-dog atmosphere is how it must be. I'm thinking of lonely people and children who will never get the support and education to become their best selves.

The new order of God's Kingdom will break the necessity of so many grim realities, which we accept because we've bought into the idea that this is just the way the world is.

Faith is our confidence that because God's kingdom is breaking into the world, these entrenched realities in fact are not so strong. This is what the Canaanite mother knew. She knew her daughter did not have to be sick.

On Friday at Pete Hines funeral, we heard how Pete, working in the furniture business was told by a supervisor to doctor a couple of advertising circulars so they had a manufacturing company's logo that had been omitted on the original thousands that went to the public. The object was to send the doctored fliers to the manufacturer to collect a fee. Pete refused. Even the supervisor admired Petes' integrity.

That's living in the authority of the Kingdom of God, which has broken into this world. The Canaanite woman trusted it, Robin Hood and his merry men served the true king, not the one lording it over them.

Let's join them! The Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. What a life we have when we start counting on that!