

Matthew 15:10-28  
Pentecost 11A  
August 20, 2017  
Grace Lutheran Church

A few years ago, I helped a friend design and build a custom cabinet to hold his 50-gallon salt-water fish tank. After coming back from the lumber yard and unloading his truck, I grabbed a pencil and tape measure while he plugged in and manned the saw.

Things were going well until the warm summer evening caused my glasses to fog up. Suddenly I couldn't read the measuring tape very well. My friend couldn't interpret my lines anymore. Confusion grew – along with the evening darkness.

Eventually we got through the all the cuts and began construction. Minus some stripped screws, dying drill batteries, and a few choice phrases I don't dare repeat here, we were able to measure what needed to be measured and build what we had set out to build.

Every time I remember those evenings in his garage I think about the measurements we make throughout our lives. We measure many things – we quantify, we calculate. We create important benchmarks to be achieved in order that we and others can be marked as successful.

Measurements inundate every phase of our lives: academic aptitude through grades and report cards, careers through paystubs and evaluations, special events through attendance and repetition, health through weight and caloric intake, social status through square footage and leather interiors.

But what about faith? What is the measuring stick for that? How do you measure faith?

How do you measure faith when rocket attacks and violence continue to destroy both land and lives in a region set apart as sacred by three world religions. When gun violence rages between gangs, teens, police, and innocent bystanders just a few blocks away. When microscopic viruses terrorize continents. When homelessness and poverty stand on street corners. When thousands of people

daily succumb to the venomous cycle of mental illness and depression. When people spew hateful words and drive cars into people who don't look or act like them. When an outsider woman begs for mercy and receives nothing but disdain from the disciples and a disparaging slur from the Shepherd of Israel.

How do we measure faith when all we can seem to measure is sadness, anger, frustration, worry, grief, and death? And even if we could measure faith, having more of it isn't going to fix any of that or make it all go away. We end up deceiving ourselves, we slip into idleness, apathy, and silence while we wait for our faith-gauge to fill up.

And maybe it's not really our fault. For perhaps we have long heard the interaction between the Canaanite woman and Jesus as an example that "enough faith" will get you what you want. We've developed an understanding that the woman's "great" faith is what changed Jesus' mind and healed her daughter.

But I'm not sure that's the point of this narrative in Matthew's gospel. The woman's faith is great not because she had a lot of it, but because of what she did with it.

Great faith is her traversing the boundaries of her non-Jewish heritage and recognizing who Jesus really was, calling out to the Lord, the Son of David for help. Great faith is hearing the stories of his ministry, stories that had reached far past the "lost house of Israel," that reached her own distant neighborhood, and calling upon him to do what she knew he could do. What her faith knew he would do.

Great faith is shouting for mercy until your lungs are dry and empty, ignoring the jabs of others who would rather you go away. Great faith is seeking relationship with the one sent into the world to create relationship. Wholeness from the one sent to restore wholeness. Grace from the one sent to embody grace.

Great faith is not an amount, it is an action. It is not something you have but someone you are. The someone you are created to be. Faith is not something we get more or less of, it is something we have already been given. You are a baptized child of God. And because of that, your faith is great!

We are given a voice, like that of the Canaanite woman, with which we shout for God's mercy for us and for others. A voice to pray that rockets and knives are replaced with words and gestures and actions of peace. A voice shouting for an end to every form of racism and every form of supremacy that so carelessly leads people into violence against the other. A voice that no longer ignores the silent signs of mental illness and one that embraces all God's children in arms of love and support.

A voice that grieves at the loss of a loved one, anguishes over the powerful grip of cancer and dementia, laments at the terminal diagnosis or chronic pain. A voice that rejoices at the birth of a new baby, celebrates a marriage, gives thanks for success in school and work.

Great faith is a heart that trusts that the power of the Spirit in the waters of baptism empowers us to live as people filled with gifts of love, giving, and service. It is coming to this table week after week to taste the goodness of God and becoming what we receive: the living body of Christ for the world.

In water, word, bread, wine and community we are renewed, made faithful, full of faith people, who go out into the deserts of this world and shout for God to do this great thing again.

Our faith is not marked on a tape measure in God's tool box. It is already great, made so by the promises of God in Christ. So the real question is not how much faith do we have, but rather what will we do with it? Will we sit silently by while the morose measurements of a world in chaos creep ever higher?

Or will we be great?