

“Six Characteristics of a Blessed Life”

**First Presbyterian Church
August 16, 2020**

Matthew 15:21-28

When I'm relaxing at home, I like to read fiction and fantasy novels about spiritual quests set in earlier times. You know, like when medieval soldiers protected the church and monks and priests, noblemen and peasants rose and fell according to their Christian character.

Last week I ran across a bit of dialogue in my current book that fits with the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman, which we just heard read. In his book titled “A Cast of Stones: The Staff and the Sword,” Patrick Carr describes the same type of allegiance to lordship and honor that we see playing out between the disciples, the woman and Jesus.¹

One of the novel's characters, named Errol Stone, trips over a nobleman who is seated with his legs stretched across the walkway. After begging his pardon, Errol is grabbed, spun around and told, “Watch where you're going, peasant.” The nobleman pushes Errol to the ground, and the crowd laughs.

A second nobleman turns to his brother and says, “What say you, Darren? We could be witnessing the future king's fool.” Darren responds saying, “Go easy, Derek. It's a rare man who's never been embarrassed. Would you make it worse?”

In our New Testament passage, the disciples make it worse. They treat the Canaanite woman with the same scorn and contempt as Derek, just because she thought herself worthy of the Lord's attention, saying, “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David...” “Send her away,” the disciples tell Jesus, “for she keeps shouting after us.” Just like Derek in the novel, the disciples see nothing worthy of their or Jesus' attention and compassion in someone so different from them. And Jesus seems to agree. When the Canaanite woman calls to Jesus saying, “... My daughter is tormented by a demon,” Matthew tells us that Jesus does not answer her at all. Instead, he seems to fall in line with the disciples, saying, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. ... It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” With this, the woman kneels before Jesus and says, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.” And only then does Jesus acknowledge her faith – and her worth as a child of God – saying, “Women (not dog) ... Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter is healed instantly.

¹ Patrick Carr, *A Cast of Stones: The Staff and the Sword* (Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 2013).

Here, we see the Canaanite woman display six characteristics of great faith, which give her access to the miracle she so desperately needs. First, she is humble before the Lord. She kneels at the feet of Jesus.

When was the last time you knelt at the feet of Jesus? For some, I know it's a daily practice. For some, I know life gets in the way, even of the best intentions, and it's only after tragedy strikes that knees bend and the soul turns to God. And yet, just think how much more blessed your life would be if you spent time everyday kneeling before the Lord in prayer, if not also in body. Something to think about – humility before the Lord.

Secondly, the Canaanite woman with Jesus shows persistence. Even though the disciples dismiss her – not unlike how we often get shoved aside in this world or shove others out of our way – she doesn't give up on the Lord.

No, having approached Jesus in faith, humbly asking for his mercy, being shoved aside by the disciples, and compared to a dog begging for scraps, this woman is persistent in her faith. No matter what anyone thinks or how rough her life is, she's not letting anything undermine her faith. How many of us can say that?!?

It's not easy to keep the faith when your world is falling apart, particularly when there's no earthly way forward. Take for example the political candidate in New Zealand named Hamish Nixon. Hamish Nixon ran on the slogan: "Nixon – The Name You Can Trust." Later, the failed candidate reflected, saying, "I can't understand why people laugh when I talk about the need for trust and integrity in politics. It's as if they know something I don't."²

It's not easy to keep the faith when your world is falling apart. We all get discouraged like Hamish, and some people allow their discouragement to get between them and God. Maybe they get let down by the church, or feel that God has forgotten them.

And yet, we mustn't let discouragement or disappoint take us out of the church, alienate us from God and the family of faith, because if we do, there truly is no way forward, at least not spiritually, not as God intends for us, not as brothers and sisters in Christ. So be persistent in your faith.

The third thing the woman has going for her – in addition to her humility and persistence – is her knowledge of Christ. She knows Jesus is ever merciful, even if, as yet, the disciples do not. The disciples don't expect her to get anywhere with Jesus, no matter what her need is.

² Karl Shaw, *The Mammoth Book of OddBalls and Eccentrics* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, Inc., 2000), 125.

But she knows, she knows that God loves and cares for all people, and not just those who fit into nice, neat religious expectations. Maintaining religious practices and coming to church only serves us, and others, and the Lord, if we have an unwavering commitment to make it count, to be challenged, equipped and supported by the church, as a faithful, loving and giving child of God.

I mean, look at the Canaanite woman. She risks everything coming to Jesus in humility. Jews hated Canaanites, because of their differing beliefs and practices. She endures – with faithful persistence – the worst possible treatment – being called a dog – because she knows Jesus, she knows how merciful he is, despite any evidence to the contrary. Humility, persistence and knowledge of God.

Oh, and she does all this – not for herself – but for her daughter, for another human being. Selflessly giving of yourself for the sake of another – that’s the fourth characteristic. The Canaanite woman is humble, persistent, knowledgeable and selfless, as we also must be, if we want to truly live in the fullness of God’s blessing.

Fifth, the Canaanite woman is aligned with God’s will. “Let it be done for you as you wish,” says Jesus. Because her heart’s desire is aligned with God’s will, it is blessed and grateful by Jesus. We need to remember that for ourselves, check our wants and desires against what Jesus reveals to us about who God is. And the only way to do that is to cultivate a deep and abiding relationship with Jesus. And the only way to do that is to come to worship and participate in the community of faith.

Sorry to those who think otherwise, but it’s true. God chooses to reveal himself to us in Jesus, and the community of faith is where that happens. Not that we don’t then display our love and knowledge of God to those outside the church. Our faith is evident and active outside the church. But that faith begins here and is nurtured and sustained through church-life.

In fact, witnessing to the faith – showing others the love and compassion of Christ and the faithfulness of God – is the sixth and final characteristics in the list we’re focusing on today – humility, persistence, knowledge and love of God, self-sacrifice, aligning with God’s will, and witnessing to the faith.

The Canaanite woman is a witness to God’s supreme interest in and commitment to our wellbeing, even if it doesn’t always seem that way, even if we sometimes wonder if God is paying attention, even if we begin to doubt God has everything in hand, even if we desperately need God’s blessing and we’re just not feeling it. God is committed to our wellbeing.

OK, here's the take-home in all of this. Whenever it doesn't seem that God has our back, has your back, stop and search your heart for which of those six characteristics you've been neglecting. In fact, do that now as I list them one more time.

Ask yourself honestly, do you regularly kneel before the Lord in humility – spiritually if not also physically? Are you persistent in your faith, no matter what the world throws your way? Are you actively nurturing your knowledge and love of God, through a Bible study, Sunday school, coming to worship, reading about the faith, serving in the community?

Do you give of yourself sacrificially for the sake of others, and do you seek to align your life with God's will? And No. 6, do you witness to the faith, do you actively tell people about what Jesus is doing in your life, or at least invite them to come and see, come and see what it's like to be a part of a loving, caring, challenging, and supportive community of faith like this one?

In the book I mentioned, "Cast of Stones," at the end of that encounter between the peasant and the noblemen, the thoughtless, misguided nobleman says, "We're only having fun, and this is, after all, just one peasant." To which the Captain of the Guard says, "Just one peasant, eh? The fate of many can be bound to one such as him."

And so it is with us. The fate of many depends upon one such as you. And there are six personal characteristics – humility, persistence, the knowledge and love of God, selfless giving, aligning your life with God's will, and witnessing to the faith – six personal characteristics that can make all the difference in the world, all the difference in your world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Persistent and loving God, you are forever looking that your will be done on Earth. You yearn for all creation to live in harmony.

Forgive us for growing weary of the struggle for peace and justice, and for times when we fall into despair. Sustain us with an abundance of faith, and give us the willingness to do that which is truly loving and to be faithful in our acts of caring.

God of hidden blessings and the promised resurrection, work your surprising and amazing grace in our lives and in our broken world. Soothe those whose bodies ache, and calm those with fevered minds. Cast out the demons of addiction and abuse, and teach us to cling to you as our greatest need.

Help us to proclaim the message of wholeness and salvation that you have taught us, for we would be your faithful disciples.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.
saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**