

August 20th 2023 | Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost | Stand Fast in Awe

There is something incredibly happy and exuberantly joyful about the word 'save'. We meet it right there in the first words of our New Testament reading from Paul's letter to the Romans. Paul's goal in his ministry is that people would be 'saved'. "You stand fast through faith," in this salvation, Paul writes. In other words, Paul says, your whole life, your love and knowledge of God, your remaining within this covenant that saves you and makes you new is reliant on faith. "So do not become proud, but stand in awe." Paul's encouragement to us is that being astonished and amazed at the promise and hope into which we are called preserves us in our faith. An attitude of worship from awestruck wonder grows and maintains our faith. And faith is a gift of God, so that nobody can boast. You can't boast about a gift. You can't say, "I earned this gift," or "I'm the cause of this gift, it was all me." Instead, our hearts are postured in grateful joy towards God for the gifts of God, including the gift of faith.

But what does Paul then call us to pay attention to? What does he note for us to give extra attention to? "Note then the kindness and sternness of God: sternness to those who fell, but kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness." Note that. Note the kindness and sternness of God. Take note of God's mercy and his wrath. Look at God's tenderness, and also his might. Take notice of the salvation and the judgement of God. Pay attention to the friendship of God as

well as his firmness. Those words - kind, and stern - bring to mind an image of a perfect Father.

Our faith is formed by what we note, what we behold, what we look at. When we look at the kindness and the sternness of God, the way they are woven together in the Bible, our faith is grown. The aim of looking at God's sternness and his kindness is not that we dwell in the sternness, but that we continue in the kindness. Noticing both allows us to cling to the kindness of God. Clarity about the preciousness of God's kindness drives out fear.

The Canaanite woman in our Gospel reading this morning immediately recognises the preciousness of God's kindness to her in Jesus. Jesus is teaching us in this story to have faith that preserves and perseveres. It is a faith that does not fall away with difficult words. This text confronts us, firstly with the desperate faith of a mother, next, with the costly demands of discipleship; and ultimately, with the incredible, unknowable, vast depths of the mercy of Jesus. This woman was a Canaanite, or Syrophonecian, and Israelites and Canaanites had a long history of significant tension. The Canaanite woman does not expect healing for her daughter based on who she is. She is a Gentile, she is not from the house of Israel. But she's talking to the Messiah, the King of Kings. She seeks out and expects healing because of who he is. While this woman recognises Jesus for

who he is, calls Jesus 'Son of David', calls him Lord and asks for her daughter to be healed, Jesus ignores her in stony silence.

We read on, and the Canaanite woman persists, and Jesus tells her that it is not fair to feed the food of children to dogs. Remarkably, she does not show any signs of feeling wronged nor offended, though this is not an uncommon response to Jesus throughout the Gospels. Rather, she agrees, placing her complete trust in Jesus' strength, and hoping for just a little crumb of Jesus' power to fall to the floor to heal her daughter. Even difficult words from Jesus do not dissuade her. She knew no discouragement. She heard Jesus say that the children, those in the house of Israel, must eat first. I can almost hear her think, "Crumbs fall from tables all the time." It is as though she says to Jesus, "So you're saying there's a chance." She immediately apprehends and takes hold of his mercy. She leaves no stone unturned. She says what we all have said upon knowing the mercy of God, "There's mercy here. Even for me. My sins are many and God's mercy is still more." Jesus commends her for her great faith and her daughter is healed. Jesus heals her without saying a word. Where there is a praying mother, perhaps there is always hope.

God's redemptive plan throughout history was for us to receive mercy. It is ours to receive. In our prayers, corporate and private, in our reading of the scriptures, corporate and private, in our singing, in our baptism, at the table. This mercy is

so lavish, so wonderful, so ridiculous yet absolutely free. It makes all self-reliance and self-righteousness impossible. The great aim of God is that we would stand in awe at this, that the nations would glorify God for his mercy. Let us humble ourselves before God and receive mercy. So may God “give us grace to dedicate our freedom to [his] service, that all people may know the glorious liberty of the children of God.”