

REVIVE US AGAIN!

Preached by Douglas Norris at First United Methodist Church, Palo Alto, California
August 19, 1984 Matthew 15:21-28

She was a woman who didn't know her place! I like Geraldine Ferraro's T-shirt. It reads, "A woman's place is in the White House." Thank God, times have changed since Bible days. Through the centuries up to our present day, a woman's place was defined and restricted by men. In our passage this morning, however, the woman did not know her place, or if she did, she couldn't care less. She didn't care who said what. She didn't care what the rules were. She didn't care what the customs were. She may not have known her place, but she knew she had a desperate need, and she knew Jesus could help.

So, she cast aside her inhibitions. She cast aside the concern for her prestige and reputation. She cast aside the rules, and she, a non-Jew, approached a Jew, namely Jesus. Not only that, she, a woman, approached and spoke to a man in public. And not only did she speak, she pleaded and wore him down with her persistence. The result: Jesus met her need. She was blessed beyond measure. Her prayer was answered. Her request, her demand, was honored.

I suggest to you on this Camp Meeting Sunday, where we remember our heritage and where we hear again the gospel message aimed at a decision--I suggest that you as an individual and we as a church follow the woman's example. Let's lay aside our pseudo-sophistication. Lay aside our educated, cultured taboos. Lay aside our inhibitions and overconcern with what other people think. Can you imagine what your life would be like? Can you imagine what a church we would have, if we approached Jesus as did this woman?

First, she had a need, a desperate need. She recognized her need, defined it, and did something about it. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. We are not told what that specifically meant. Perhaps she was emotionally disturbed. Perhaps she had a physical illness. The term "possessed by a demon" was a common expression to describe many maladies. Whatever it was specifically, the daughter was in turmoil, and the mother worried. Probably she had tried all the doctors, psychiatrists, Stanford Hospital, Mayo Clinic. She had probably toured all the specialists of her day, and to no avail. She was desperate. Somewhere there was help for her daughter. Someone somewhere could help. The woman had a need.

We, too, have needs. Often, however, we do not recognize our needs, nor define them in terms of needs for God. Perhaps we are too comfortable. But not underneath, are we? I believe we moderns have the same agonies, the same soul needs, the same deep longing and yearning for God that drove Martin Luther to his knees on the stairs in Rome, or that drove John Wesley to the meeting on Aldersgate Street. We have the same needs, but too often we don't recognize them any more as needs for God, as cries for Christ. We give them psychological names, or sociological titles, or we blame our parents or society. Or, we feel that if we had enough education, or money, or fame, we would be happy. It's like trying to satisfy a hungry stomach with water. Water works for a while when you are hungry, but it is a short-term satisfaction. Eventually, the stomach cries out, not for water, but for food.

There is a place in our lives for psychiatry and counseling, but psychiatry doesn't always reach the needs of the soul. There's a crucial importance for education, but education is for the head, and rarely reaches the depths of the soul. There's a large grasping for money and material security in our day, but money doesn't satisfy the hunger of the soul.

I'm talking about your inner spirit, the depths of your being, your soul. Down inside you where no one else has gone, what no one knows about you, or has rarely touched. Down inside you where you feel lonely; where you feel deserted, worthless, useless; where you feel dirty, unclean; where you feel unloved, unwanted; where you question your purpose, why you were born; down where you doubt. Those are the needs of the soul. Those are the needs that Jesus Christ can satisfy. Those are spots the Holy Spirit can reach with love, joy, and peace. That is what the Bible calls the heart, and God's grace can touch the heart. God's grace can cleanse, heal, restore, rejuvenate, revive.

The woman had a need, a demonstrable need: her daughter was possessed by a demon; and secondly, the woman believed Jesus could meet her need. She had a faith, a simple faith, a direct faith. Her faith was not wrapped in layers of sophistication, not hidden by intellectual reasoning, not obscured by layers of theology--systems of propositions. She just had a simple faith: my daughter is ill, and I know Jesus can heal her. She believed that Jesus could meet her need.

Jesus Christ can drive out the demons and restore sanity. Jesus can banish illness and restore health. Jesus can destroy disease and heal the body. Jesus takes dull, drab, listless, directionless lives and creates exciting, adventurous, thrilling lives. Jesus can take dying churches, deteriorating, dull, boring churches and revive them!

The woman believed that Jesus could heal her daughter. Perhaps that is an important clue to a spiritually dead church and inert Christians. Do you believe that Jesus can touch your hurt, heal your pains, give direction to your life? Youths, with your future before you, with decisions to make about school and career, do you believe Jesus can lead you? Do you believe God has a will for your life, a purpose? Can you imagine what your life would be like if you had a simple faith in Jesus, like the woman's? Recognizing your needs, admitting your needs, can you imagine what you would be like if you trusted Jesus? A childlike trust, put your hand in his hand and walk with him.

The woman had a desperate need. She believed that Jesus could meet her need. Thirdly, she asked, she persisted. She approached Jesus and cried, "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely possessed by a demon." Can you hear her agony, her worry? But, Jesus did not answer her. I don't know about you, but I have had the experience of not receiving immediate answers to prayer. Have you? Doesn't it sometimes make you wonder if God is listening? Usually, we then give up; not wanting to be impolite or persistent. But the woman was beyond caring whether or not she was polite. She kept it up, even though Jesus was not answering. The disciples got uncomfortable and asked Jesus to send her away, to keep her from bothering them. So Jesus said to the Canaanite woman, "I was sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," reminding her that he was a Jew, and the Jews and non-Jews did not have much to do with each other. But still she wouldn't give up. "Help me," she cried. Jesus was even more severe with her, or was he joking with her when he said, "It is not fair to take the children's bread and throw it to the dogs," meaning that the Jewish Messiah was for the Jews. But she was undaunted, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Jesus was impressed with her faith, impressed with her persistence, and healed her daughter instantly. The woman persisted.

Perhaps our experience of Christ is not vivid and dramatic because we don't call; we don't ask; we don't plead. Prayer is persistent. Prayer is impertinent! Some say, "Who am I to bother God?" We bother God because prayer is impertinent. "Help me," she cried, "heal my daughter."

One of the best things to happen to America in recent history was the hosting of the Summer Olympics. The Los Angeles event captured the TV ratings and resonated with the soul of America. How we were inspired by patriotism, pride in our athletes, pleased with their example. Weren't you impressed with the dedication, discipline and perseverance of the Olympic stars? Mary Lou Retton, gymnast, is a household word now and an example for all of us with her spirit, training, persistence. And old folks are inspired now by Carlos Lopes, winning the 26-mile marathon at the age of 37.

Can you imagine what your life would be like, what our church would be like, if we were as zealous in our pursuit of Christ as the Olympic athletes are in their pursuit of the gold medal, and as zealous as the woman in her concern for her daughter? God does not do much with us without our permission. God is polite. Oh, sometimes, we are hit between the eyes with a baseball bat, but most of the time, God does not do any more with us than what we ask, and what we ask is often pitifully small, narrow and puny.

What is missing in Christianity today is the pursuit of God. Yes, grace is free, but to receive grace in its fullness requires dedication, commitment, seriousness and perseverance on our part. "Love God" is the first commandment. Love God, not just for what God can give, but for God himself. The need of your soul is for a relationship with Christ; not for things, but Christ. What kind of romance, what kind of marriage is it when the relationship is built on what each can do for the other, rather than on love and need just for the other, not for things, but for the other as a person. A young man said to his sweetheart, "Honey, I love you. I know I can't give you diamonds or jewels like Jerome. I don't have a Porsche or a yacht like Jerome, but I love you with all that I am." She replied, "I love you, too, dear, but tell me more about Jerome!" To love God for the benefits is hardly sufficient for a lasting, satisfying, fulfilling relationship. Seek God for himself. Christ satisfies your deeper needs, the needs of the soul.

Have you asked? Have you persisted? Can you imagine what you would be like if you opened your life to the Holy Spirit? Can you imagine what our church would be like if we prayed, seriously, earnestly, persistently, "O, Lord, revive us again!"

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(MATTHEW 15:21-28)

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