

Streetsville United Church  
Sunday, August 17, 2008  
Rev. John Tapscott

"GREAT IS YOUR FAITH"

Matthew 15:28

Some of you may remember the story I told about the young minister who one Sunday preached what he felt was an exceptional sermon - perhaps his best ever. Many people expressed appreciation for his efforts. After the service, walking home with his wife, he wondered aloud, "I wonder how many really great preachers there are in the world today?" And in her loving way, as only a wife can do, she replied, "One less than you think, dear!"

Now words like great, amazing, and awesome are tossed out freely today, but the number of truly great people in most fields is quite limited. In sports we can think of the golfer Tiger Woods and the swimmer Michael Phelps and a few others. And it's similar in other fields of endeavours.

Now most of us, perhaps all of us, would hesitate to call ourselves great at anything. But there is an area in which any one of us can be great - and that is the area of faith. It can be said to some of us here right now and potentially to all of us, "Great is your faith."

Now Jesus first said those words to a Canaanite woman who lived in the district of Tyre and Sidon. The more zealous among the Jewish people considered the Canaanites as enemies who should have been destroyed long ago. Jesus rejected such ideas and withdrew into Gentile territory for a time. Suddenly a woman approached him, shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." Here was a loving mother, doing all she could to find relief for a condition that was destroying her daughter. Jesus stayed silent at first. Perhaps Jesus thought he could travel incognito in this area, but his name and fame had spread even to the Gentiles. There really was no place for Jesus to lay his head and rest. The disciples wanted him to send her away, but Jesus sensed something happening here. Jesus said, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus knew the Father had sent him to his own people first. But was God using this woman's anguished cries to teach Jesus something new about his mission? Was God showing Jesus and the disciples that their mission would ultimately reach all nations and all peoples? Perhaps. In any case the woman came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not right to take the

children's bread and throw it to the dogs." The woman replied, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Her daughter was healed instantly.

Now you and I may not be great at anything else but each one of us can have a great faith. Don't disqualify yourself and say, "That could never be me." Jesus praised this woman's faith and he also praised the great faith of a Roman centurion, and they weren't the most likely candidates for great faith. Yet they had it and we have to give God's Spirit the credit and the glory. But when we look at what made this woman's faith great, we see that really anyone of us can have it. It's not that complicated. "Great is your faith." And if you and I desire great faith, God will surely grant us that blessing. So what are the marks of a great faith?

**First, great faith is faith in a great person.**

The woman shouted, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David..." Hearing these exalted titles must have surprised Jesus. He wasn't hearing this kind of confession among his own people. But somehow the word about Jesus had reached her and so she turned to him in faith, trusting that he could help her daughter.

Now the woman's faith might have been large; or it may have been the size of a mustard faith. But what made her faith great was the greatness of the one to whom her faith was given.

You see, it's far better to have a small, tentative faith in the right person than a huge, unshakable faith in the wrong person. I can show you this easily. There were people who had a huge faith in Adolf Hitler. But that was not great faith because it was given to the wrong person. Similarly, how many people gave their lives for Communism; sold out their souls and their families and friends for the sake of a Marxist utopia. They had large faith, but it wasn't great faith because it was given to the wrong thing. I'll give you a more positive example of this. If Barak Obama is elected U.S. President it may well be a good thing for his country and the world. But I fear some people are putting unrealistic faith in him to bring about change. For every President who has served tells us about the practical and constitutional limits to Presidential power. Barak Obama is a good man, no doubt, but there is no way he can fulfill the wild hopes some people are pinning on him. Their faith in him will be disappointed, because he doesn't have enough power to do all people expect of him.

What makes your faith great is the greatness of the one to whom it is given. A preacher doesn't hold up faith and say, "Have faith." A preacher proclaims Christ in all his fullness and invites you to put your faith in Him. A preacher gives you the vision of Almighty and Merciful God which calls forth your love and trust.

So you have great faith if it is directed toward Jesus and given to Him. Through his life, his works, his matchless teachings, his atoning death for our sin and his resurrection victory he proves that he can be trusted fully in life and in death. He is forgiver of sin; the One who has power over the evil which assails us; the One, the only One who can save us from destruction and bring us to the Father's house; the One who reigns and will come again to complete God's Kingdom. To cry out to Jesus, "Lord, help me," is great faith, because it is faith in the Living Lord, the Exalted Son of God who loves you and me with an everlasting love. We can trust Him to take away our sins, we can trust him to make a difference in every situation of our life; we can invite him to help our loved ones; we can trust him to fulfill our lives and bring us to God's eternal Kingdom. Only He is great enough to do these things.

Great faith is not complicated. Great faith is faith in Christ Jesus, because he is great enough to fulfill every promise he has made to His church. He is worthy of all the hope and trust we put in Him. As Scripture says, "No one who trusts in Him will be put to shame." So that's the first thing. Great faith is faith in a great person, Jesus Christ, the Lord, the Son of David, the Son of God.

"Great is your faith." **The second mark of great faith is humility.**

The woman came and knelt before Jesus, "Lord, help me." There was no sense of pride, no sense of having earned the Lord's help, no leaning on a charter of rights. She came with empty hands, recognizing that her hope lay not in herself but strictly in Jesus.

Great faith doesn't come boasting of what we have done to earn the Lord's favour; nor do we come thinking we will be rejected because we haven't done enough. Some people say with a chuckle, "If I ever came to church, the roof would fall down." Seriously, they're saying, "I've been away from God for so long that he surely wouldn't help me now." But if we had to earn the Lord's help none of us would make it. Truthfully we are all beggars before God's table, looking for crumbs of mercy. Great faith looks away from what you have or haven't done, and trusts fully in Christ's mercy and his ability to help. That's what the Bible means when it says you are saved by grace through faith. Great faith humbly trusts not in our own worthiness, but in the merciful and loving character of God. "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face.

And the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace.”

“Woman, great is your faith.” **Finally, great faith is marked by perseverance.**

Though Jesus hesitated at first and the disciples thought he should send her away, the woman persevered. Jesus said, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.” “Yes, Lord,” she said, “but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” Now Jesus wasn’t deliberately withholding his help, but testing her faith to see if it was the real thing, which it was. This whole incident took maybe five minutes, but one reason he said to her, “Woman, great is your faith” was because he saw the seeds of perseverance in her faith.

A great faith is a perseverant faith, a persistent faith. There is much in our lives and in the world that discourages faith, but great faith hangs on through the high times and the low times, the silent times, the times of doubt and discouragement. Great faith is confidence that the Lord will yet do what he has promised.

We’re told that if we invest in the stock market, we need a long-term horizon. And with the right combination of equities, we can weather the ups and downs of each passing day and year, trusting that our wise investment will have real value in the end.

In a far more profound way, great faith in God and in Christ is like that. Sometimes our faith has to persist for years in spite of God’s apparent silence, in spite of obstacles and setbacks. But great faith perseveres because you know your faith is placed in One who will not disappoint you. A great faith perseveres.

And if there is one practical step you and I can take to strengthen our faith, and to grow that seed of persistence, it is to share our faith. Not all of us are natural evangelists, and we sometimes get tongue-tied about our faith. But even if you find one person you can speak with about faith that will strengthen your faith and lift your spiritual confidence more than you can imagine. And you never know, that just may be the seed that will lead that person on a journey in which they too, may cross the line of Christian faith and commitment.

I am sure that there are many right now in this church, and many throughout the Christian church to whom the Lord is saying, “Great is your faith” because it is fixed on Jesus, and marked by humility and perseverance. By God’s grace and our desire, it can and will be said about each one of us.

