

### Persistent Faith

*“Then Jesus answered her, ‘O woman, great is your faith!’ ...” Matthew 15:28a*

Last weekend, my family and I had the opportunity to go to Wisconsin to see our nephew be baptized. It was really nice to be with family and also witness God’s work of enlarging His family as He claimed this little one in the waters of Holy Baptism. What wasn’t so nice, was the travel to and from Wisconsin. Having to go through or around Chicago was wearisome and downright frustrating. Our most recent experience certainly gives me even greater appreciation for the many times that my brother and his family make the trip to Fort Wayne!

Thankfully our family has had some experience traveling as well and so we were prepared for the delays that came. Along with toys and silly songs, we also had some movies downloaded to help past the time. The favorite for this trip was the movie, *Cars*. Both on the way there and on the way back, we played this movie. As I drove, I got to listen. Now some of you may know this experience too, listening to a movie without being able to watch it is quite different. It can emphasize things that you overlook when you’re watching. For me, the relationship between the main character, Lightning McQueen, and the Radiator Springs’ judge, Doc Hudson, really stood out.

Just so we’re all on the same page, here’s a quick rundown of the movie plot. The main character, Lightning McQueen, is the young, hotshot racecar who has the lofty goal to make a big name for himself and land a premier sponsorship. His journey towards this goal gets sidetracked as he gets lost in the forgotten town of Radiator Springs. It’s in this town that McQueen meets his foil, Doc Hudson. After this significant detour in Radiator Springs, McQueen, is able to continue his racing career with greater appreciation and perspective.

The relationship between McQueen and Doc begins as one of major contrast. McQueen is unseasoned, arrogant and anxious to meet his selfish goals to cement his fame. Doc is a seasoned, humble and steady presence for a forgotten town. Needless to say, their personalities clash, until finally McQueen has his eyes open to how much he still has to learn about life and racing. Eventually, these two are shown to have many more similarities than how things first appeared.

This stark contrast between McQueen and Doc came to mind as I thought about last weekend’s Gospel reading and this weekend’s Gospel reading. Last weekend, we heard about Peter’s attempt to walk on water at Jesus’ invitation. As you may remember, Peter starts out well and then gets distracted and begins to sink. Jesus comes to his rescue but admonishes Peter for his lack of understanding, saying, **“O you of little faith, why did you doubt?”** (*Matthew 14:31b*). However, this weekend, Jesus praises a foreigner’s faith with the words we heard just moments ago, **“O woman, great is your faith!” ...** (*Matthew 15:28a*).

The contrast between Peter and the disciples and this Canaanite woman is also quite stark. On the one hand, you have male Israelites who are closely connected to Jesus as His most intimate followers. On the other hand, you have a female, Gentile stranger whose connection to Jesus is likely based on things she’s heard from a distance. Based on these details alone, it would seem way more likely that Jesus’ disciples would be the ones being praised for their faith as opposed to this foreigner and yet that’s not what we witness.

Unlike Peter and the other disciples, who quickly doubted in the face of their challenges. This Canaanite mother demonstrates persistent and steady faith in the face of her challenges. While this woman isn’t met with distracting wind and waves, she is met with formidable tests to her own faith. Her initial request is met with silence. Her continued plea stirs up a desire in Jesus’ disciples for her to be silenced and removed from their presence. Her final appeal at the feet of Jesus is met with a difficult statement about what was considered appropriate and accepted conduct at that time. Even after being met with this resistance, this woman, in faith, humbly acknowledges what she has heard and continues to trust that God still has more than enough mercy for her ailing daughter.

The contrast in faith between the disciples and this woman reveals just how much the disciples had to learn. To be clear, the disciples’ lesson wasn’t that this woman had some sort of heritage that turned her into a super-believer. The few details we know about her suggest otherwise. She wasn’t part of Israel, but rather from a nation that was known for its past idolatry. Neither was the lesson that this woman’s faith was better than the disciples’ faith. She hadn’t placed her faith in something better than they had. For both, this woman and the disciples, the object of their faith was Jesus. And with faith in Jesus, we can say with confidence that they all shared complete, saving faith.

The lesson here for the disciples was how much growth and understanding God produces in the faith He has already created. God-given faith isn't static; it is dynamic and living. The faith God gives, He continues to season with wisdom and experience. That's what this woman was evidence of – God's work of seasoning faith He has already given. By God's grace in the face of these challenges, this woman's faith was persistent and steady, not distracted, but focused on the One she knew could help.

This is an astonishing lesson for the disciples and for us too. God has and will continue to produce seasoned faith from those we might consider the most unlikely of people! Even when that individual's history and background would seem to suggest otherwise, this doesn't limit what God can create and grow! Faith itself and its depth of understanding is a gift of God through His Word that isn't determined by age, gender, race or any other demographic that we could detail and observe. God's gift of faith is for all people and He desires to grow and mature the faith that He gives into persistent and steady faith in Him even in the face of difficult trials.

Like Jesus' disciples in that moment, we also have a lot to learn when it comes to God's gift of faith. So, thanks be to God, He is creating faith right now in this place through His Word and gifts and He is also growing the faith He has given. And what we have to be constantly reminded of is that God's work of growing and maturing faith is a lifelong process. There are no summers off from faith. There are no graduations from faith. Faith is not just a tool for inside these church walls. The faith God gives and grows is for every day of life, 24/7, 365 days a year, and it is a gift that God seeks to continue to deepen by His Word and gifts and to season by the experiences of our life that He walks us through.

If we are concerned about the faith of someone we know and the obstacles we see standing in the way, I commend to us the evidence of this Canaanite woman to remind us all of the work that God can do to produce faith. Despite the fact that this woman was from a cursed, idolatrous and decimated people, the Lord delivered faith into her life that was confident in Him. God's promise that He desires all people to be saved is true. So, like this woman, may our faith be led to be persistent and steady even in the face of these concerns.

If we are concerned about our own faith, unsure if God is really able to create and grow faith in us, I commend to us the evidence of Peter. Through Jesus' life, death and resurrection, Peter's young and distracted faith was grown into persistent, seasoned and steady faith focus on his Lord and Savior. Through the same Jesus Christ and His life, death and resurrection we too are being grown into persistent, seasoned and steadier people of faith.

God worked in Peter's life, changing him from one who doubted and was distracted by the wind and the waves to one who was persistent and steady in faith, focused on Jesus. And from this persistent and steady faith in Jesus, he was able to encourage other believers in their faith journeys as they faced their own trials. Listen to what he wrote:

**“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been grieved by various trials, so that the tested genuineness of your faith – more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire – may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls” (1 Peter 1:3-9).**

Today, Peter's encouragement is for us too. The One who created and grew persistent and steady faith in the Canaanite woman; the One who created and grew persistent and steady faith in Peter; is the same One, who by His great mercy, has created and is growing persistent and steady faith in us too. God's work in us isn't over and by His grace, may He continue to season our faith until He calls us home. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan