

Ordinary 20A - 2020

What would you think if I told you that on your tombstone would be inscribed a four-word epitaph? Well, you might respond, it would depend on who would write this epitaph--an enemy or a loved one. It might also depend, you might say, on how well this person knew and understood you.

If a newspaper critic wrote of a concert pianist the four words: "He was a failure," you could always say: That was his opinion. But if one of the world's great musicians wrote, "He was a genius," then you are apt to take the remark more seriously.

There was a character in the *Gospel* who Jesus once described with four immortal words: *Great is your faith*. She was a Canaanite woman who came from the country to the north of Palestine, a country hostile to the Jews. She was presumably married, she had at least one child; but that's all we know about her. We don't know whether she was a good woman or a bad woman. We don't know her name. All we know of her is that in this single encounter with Jesus he spoke to her this four-word epitaph: **Great is your faith**.

Only four words but they are enough to make her immortal. We can trust these words as being true because the expert on faith spoke them. Jesus searched for faith, as a gem collector would fine jewels. He did not always find it in his disciples. On no occasion that we know did he ever say of Peter, James, and John: *Great is your faith*. More often the words he spoke to them: *You of little faith*.

On only one other occasion did Jesus praise a person for their faith. Interestingly, that was a Roman soldier stationed in Capernaum. We regard this Canaanite woman with more than just an academic interest. She awakens in us a feeling of admiration, perhaps even envy, because she stands where most of us would like to stand.

What faithful Christian would not like it said of him or her: *Great is your faith*?

Think of what it would mean if an aspiring young artist had Picasso place his hand on his shoulder and say: You have a great talent. How wonderful it would be then to a believer in God, if Jesus would place his hand on our shoulder and say: You have a remarkable talent for faith. But how does one qualify for this praise? What does one have to do?

Thinking of Nothing Else: Concentration

The famous one-time Catholic monk, Martin Luther, was legendary not just for nailing a piece of paper to the door of his home church citing 95 things that needed to be changed about it. He wrote and lectured extensively to his students at the university as well. Some of his students were very good learners, and others were not so good.

But a few of his students realized that some of the most valuable instruction that Luther gave was not in the classroom, but was in the dining hall over a meal and a few drinks. His students began taking notes on what Luther told them in that relaxed atmosphere, and they eventually published these notes in what was known as *Martin Luther's Table Talks*. One such example of the profound insight and truth Luther gave his students happened one day after class in the dining hall and they were all sitting around eating their meal and talking on the subject of prayer.

A student of Luther's by the name of Viet Dietrich preserved Luther's words for us: "When Luther's puppy, Tölpel, happened to be at the table, looked for a morsel from his master, and watched with open mouth and motionless eyes, Luther said, 'Oh, if I could only pray the way this dog watches the meat! All his thoughts are concentrated on the piece of meat. Otherwise, he has no thought, wish, or hope'" (Table Talks, May 18, 1532). Martin Luther's puppy reminds me of the woman in today's Gospel lesson from Matthew. Although this woman was a Gentile, from the region of Tyre and Sidon (modern day Lebanon), she couldn't think about anything other than Jesus healing her daughter. (by J. Curtis Goforth, OSL from *I Ain't Too Proud to Beg*)

A Mother's Faith

St. Augustine's mother, Monica, was a fervent believer who prayed constantly for her son's salvation. She devoted her whole life to praying for Augustine's conversion. At one point, when Augustine was becoming devoted to the Manichaeian philosophy, Monica begged a holy man to speak to Augustine, and show him why their beliefs were not true. The holy man refused because Augustine was known to have a great intellect, and would likely try to savage the holy man's arguments. The holy man assured Monica that he, too, had once been a Manichaeian, and that Augustine was too smart to deceive himself much longer.

At this, Monica began to cry. The holy man sent her away, saying, "Go, go! Leave me alone. Live on as you are living. It is not possible that the son of such tears should be lost." The holy man was right. After many years and a fierce inner struggle, Augustine was touched by a revelation in Scripture, and became a Christian.

When Monica learned of her son's salvation, she remarked that she had nothing left to live for, for the greatest desire of her heart had been fulfilled. Nine days later, Monica died. And the son she had spent her life praying for, went on to affect the whole world.

Monica never quit asking. "Live on as you are living," said the holy man. "It is not possible that the son of such tears should be lost." You are concerned about someone you love? Keep on asking God for help. Don't let your tears quench the flame of your faith in God. It may seem like God is ignoring you, but I assure you that is not the case. Don't give up. Keep asking: And keep on trusting. (by King Duncan from *When You Need Help*, adapted from Ruth Bell Graham, *Prodigals and Those Who Love Them*)