

Proper 18B (Pentecost 14)

Text: Mark 7:24-37

Title: "A Mother's Faith"

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Families define us. They give us our identity and a place to belong.

We all have parents. You started out as someone's son or daughter, and that's how people knew you. As you got older you might have been someone's brother or sister, and then someone's husband or wife, and then maybe someone's mom or dad, or aunt or uncle, or grandma or grandpa.

First I was Ted and Karen's son. When I went to school, many people knew me as Suzanne's little brother. When I went to college and the seminary most people didn't know my family, and so it was just me. When my parents came to visit they were Mark's mom and dad. Later I became Izabel's godfather and then Lillia's uncle. For fifteen months now I've been Amberleigh's husband. And for the past six months, I've been the father of my unborn child.

Families give us a place to belong, and people to care for us. When God created humankind, he put man and woman together and blessed them with children.

Family members care for one another, both physically and spiritually. It is a parent's responsibility to provide for all the needs of their children from making sure that they are fed and clothed, they get a good education, and that they are raised in the faith.

The mission statement of this congregation is, "Reaching out to build Christ-centered families of faith." "Christ-centered families of faith." What is a family of faith? What does it mean to have Christ at the center of our family? What do "Christ centered families of faith look like? Our gospel lessons for the next several weeks show us what these families look like, and what it means to have Christ at the center. This week it is a mother of faith who begs Jesus to heal her daughter. Next week it will be a father of faith who begs Jesus to heal his son. After that we see what it means to be a child of faith and trust in Jesus.

But ladies first, and so today is mother's day. There's no relationship quite like the one with your mother. Your mother is the one who carried you inside her for nine months, and who gave birth to you. A mother's love is intense and deep. A mother will do anything for her child.

Our gospel lesson tells of a loving, desperate mother.

Imagine for a moment that you're this mother. Put yourself in her shoes.

You have a young daughter with a disability. There's nothing physically wrong with her, but she suffers from demonic possession. She's not herself. She's not in control of her body or her mind. She's completely out of control. She says and does horrible, evil things.

Your neighbors and even your family members look down on you. They doubt that your daughter has a real problem, and they just assume that you're a bad parent. They don't want to have anything to do with you. They don't want your daughter to play with theirs. When they see your family coming, they cross on the other side of the street.

But you love your daughter, and you would do anything to help her. In fact you've tried everything you can think of. So when you hear that a Jewish rabbi is in town, someone who has a track record of helping other people deal with their demons, you go looking for Him. Even though He's a Jew and you're a Gentile, even though he's a man and you're a woman, you don't care. You're beyond caring about etiquette and manners. You will do anything to help your daughter.

When you find Him, you fall down at His feet and start to beg. In between the tears, you manage to get out the words, "Please, please help my daughter, have mercy on us, please."

The man speaks, but it's not good news. "You're not one of mine," He says. "You're not one of my children. I take care of my children and provide for them. You're like a dog begging for food."

You know that He's right. You know that you don't belong, that you don't deserve any special favors.

"Yes, Lord," you tell him. "Yes, Lord, I know what I'm asking of you. I know I don't deserve anything. I know I'm not worthy to be your child. I am a dog. I'm an outsider. But even the dogs get the crumbs, the scraps, the leftovers. Feed your children, Jesus. I've got children of my own, and I would never neglect them. But I've watched how my children eat, and I know that a few crumbs always find their way to the floor. Please, I'm sure there's enough that I could have a crumb. Just one crumb will do."

And immediately a smile breaks onto Jesus' face, and He says to you, "O woman, great is your faith, you can go home to your daughter because the demon has left."

Imagine your joy and surprise. You had hoped and prayed for this day, but you never thought this day would finally come. Your daughter has been set free. You race home to find her lying in bed, finally calm and at peace.

This mother had a Christ-centered family of faith. From the outside, it didn't look like it. She didn't have a picture perfect family. They weren't the Bradys or the Waltons. They probably looked more like the Simpsons.

But being a Christ-centered family of faith is not about having a perfect family, with kids who are always well-behaved and parents who never fight or get upset.

In families of faith, you have kids who get in trouble from time to time. You have kids who suffer from various illnesses, both physical and mental. You have problems with drugs, alcohol or gambling. You have family members who are in trouble with the law. You have children

born out of wedlock. You have family members who have been divorced, sometimes more than once. Families of faith are real families with real problems.

Just look at the families of faith in your Bible. Look at Jesus' own family. He had Abraham, Rahab, and David- a liar, a prostitute and an adulterer as His ancestors.

Families of faith aren't perfect families, or else there wouldn't be any. It would be useless to try to build them because they would always be falling apart.

To have a family of faith is not about being perfect. This would be putting ourselves at the center and making it about us.

Many families are focused in on themselves. They want to be successful, to be comfortable, to have a nice home be able to take nice vacations. But that's not a Christ-centered family of faith. That's a "me-centered" family.

Families of Faith have Christ at their center. They rely and trust in Him for all things. They don't trust in their own strength. They don't trust in their savings accounts. They don't trust in their own education. Soon or later all of these things fail. Sooner or later things go wrong. Health fails. Jobs disappear. Money runs out.

Having Christ at the center does not mean that things will never go wrong in your family. It means that when things do go wrong your family won't fall apart.

Look to the Syrophenician mother. Satan himself had invaded her family and taken possession of her daughter. It doesn't get much worse than that.

This mother knew where to go for help. She knew that only Jesus could help her and her family. She sought Him out and wouldn't let go until He gave her what she came for. This was a mother of faith. She prayed to the Lord. She listened to His words. And she received the crumbs from His table and is sent back to care for her family.

This is a picture of what happens every week in the divine service. We come, just like this mother, to beg from the Lord. We beg for blessings for our sons and our daughters, our husbands and our wives, our grandkids, and all the members of our family. We are here not only for our own needs, but to pray for the needs of our families. "Lord, have mercy," we beg.

And then Jesus speaks. His words show us who we are. We are all Gentile dogs. We are sinful and unclean. We don't deserve a place at the master's table.

But here, even the dogs get something to eat. Even the dogs are well-fed. He feed us with a tiny crumb of bread and small sip of wine, and through these humble means, we receive Christ Himself- His body and His blood.

Here, in the divine service, Christ puts Himself in the center of our lives. This is where Christ-centered families of faith are built. To have a Christ-centered family means to be here every week with Christ at the center of everything.

Mothers of faith are those who beg from Jesus, who listen to Jesus, who agree with Jesus, who keep asking from Jesus, who receive the crumbs from His table and who care for their families.

One reason why I am here preaching to you today is because I have a mother of faith. My mother has been praying for me, begging for crumbs from the Lord for me all of my life. My mom has a recliner that sits by the window in our living room. Every morning that's where she sits, she reads her devotion and she prays. She prays for me and for my sister and for her family and others in need. When things have going bad I remember that my mom is praying for me, and I know that the Lord will hear her prayers.

So mothers, pray for children. Beg and plead from the Lord. Even when things seem hopeless. Especially when things seem hopeless. You won't ever have a perfect family, and that's why you need Christ at the center. He's there to hear your prayers when everything is going wrong.

Families define us. They make us who we are. With Christ at the center of your family, Christ defines us. Christ makes you who you are. Christ hears your prayers, blesses you, and sends you on your way.

Next week, the Fathers are up.