
Forgotten Saints of Good Faith

A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
The Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 18, Year B

A couple of years ago, I had a dream. It was really a vision, of a chapel that was dedicated not to any of the familiar saints of our tradition; not to St. Peter or St John, or St. Mary or St. Catherine, or St. Francis. I saw a chapel that was dedicated to the forgotten saints of good faith.

Granted, our own church, this Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, is already dedicated to one of the lesser known saints of Christianity. There are not many cathedrals whose patron saint is a deacon, Philip the deacon. The average person in a car driving up Peachtree Road could not tell you who Saint Philip was. But we can show them. We can show them by the way we act (as the Epistle of James noted this morning; “I by my works will show you my faith.” We can give evidence of the deacon Philip, because we serve. We who serve, here at the Cathedral, are following the tradition of the servant deacon Philip.

Well, the vision that I saw two years ago was of a chapel dedicated to even lesser known people of faith. The forgotten saints of good faith.

Some of you remember me saying years ago, that, as a teen-ager, when I was discovering the power of Christianity, I asked God the specific question: what about people of other religions? God’s clear voice came to me that night. It was something like this: “You do not need to worry about people of other religions. Jesus is Lord for you, right now, and I will care for everyone else, too.”

Over time, as I have studied scripture, I have noticed a beautiful and surprising feature. The people of God, the saints of God, are often surprised when they notice God showing up in places they did not expect. And the people of God –us!–get surprised, again and again, when God shows up in people we did not expect!

These other people are who I call the “Forgotten Saints of Good Faith.” They are in the Bible! And they come from outside the familiar tradition, from outside whoever the established people of God might be!

What if there were a chapel, a church, dedicated to these forgotten saints? Well, that chapel, that gathering place, would be a house of prayer for all people, wouldn’t it?

Here is who I am talking about:

Within the very first chapters of the Bible, Abram, the father of faith, gave a tenth of all he had – a tithe—to a foreign priest, whose name was Melchizedek: a priest – the Bible says—of God Most High. This was a different tradition from the Yahweh tradition! Melchizedek was one of the forgotten saints of good faith.

Rahab, the woman of Jericho, saved the Israelites who were sent to Jericho by Joshua. She actually asked the men of Joshua for a sign, she said, a sign of “good faith.” Well, she, a foreigner, she herself was that sign of good faith!

Ruth was a Moabite, whose good faith and devotion to her mother-in-law, placed her in good stead with Boaz. And Ruth, the foreigner, became the ancestor of David, and the ancestor of the messiah. Are there any chapels dedicated to Ruth?

Her story is a surprising story! And that is why it is in the Bible. The established people of God were surprised that faith could be found in a foreigner, and so they recorded the story.

Cyrus was a Persian, the King of Persia, who would one day allow the chosen people to return to Jerusalem. Isaiah actually called Cyrus, a foreigner, the anointed, the messiah!

Oh, the list goes on! When Jesus was born, someone noticed that Persians were among those bringing honor to Jesus. "We three kings of orient are," were foreigners, foreigners of good faith, bringing tribute to Jesus. There may be a chapel, somewhere in Christendom, dedicated to the Three Wise Men.

Isaiah (chapter 56) prophesied that "the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to him, to love the name of the LORD... these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."

Isaiah prophesied that even eunuchs, so-called "blemished" people, would have a place in the house of prayer for all people. Has there ever been a chapel dedicated to the Ethiopian eunuch, whom the deacon Philip baptized in Acts, chapter 8? It is said (by Irenaeus) that his name was Simeon Bachos; and he is actually remembered now, in the Episcopal calendar, on August 26. Irenaeus said he, a foreigner, returned to Ethiopia and became an evangelist.

Ah! Then there is this story, the story we heard in today's gospel. Has there ever been a chapel dedicated to the Syro-Phoenician Woman? The Gentile, whom Jesus himself compares to a dog?

Today's gospel story is one of the most surprising of all, one of the most surprising stories of forgotten saints of good faith. Jesus himself gets surprised! The Gospel of Matthew, chapter 15, tells the same story. The woman is called a Canaanite there, but the titles all indicate the same thing; she was from Syria and Phoenicia, from Canaan; she was a Gentile, not one of the chosen people. Not one of the accepted people of God. A Canaanite.

She has a daughter being tormented by an unclean spirit. "Lord, have mercy on me!" she calls out. And Jesus, to our horror, responds in a truly ugly way: it is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." He means the children of Israel's food. Even Jesus is having a hard time acknowledging the holiness of a foreigner.

But the Canaanite woman (the Syro-Phoenician woman) speaks out, "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs." She speaks forcefully, with agency and legitimacy, and faith. And Jesus is surprised. Jesus is persuaded. Jesus changes his mind! "Woman," he says, "Great is your faith. Your daughter is healed."

This morning, the Canaanite woman is the forgotten saint of good faith. We remember another forgotten saint of good faith.

Let's be surprised. Let's be surprised, listening to people whom we might not think are the chosen people. Something refreshing happens when we are surprised by good faith. We encounter God again! We encounter love again, from some of the most surprising places and people.

One more thing: This feature of scripture, that the people of God encounter good faith in people outside ourselves, actually applies to ourselves, too. Often, it is we ourselves who feel like the foreigner, who feel left out in life. Even when we might think we have had so much in life, and had so much privilege –still we can feel left out, forgotten, ignored, like we are foreigners in the world around us.

These biblical stories of the forgotten saints of good faith, apply to us, in our lonely times. No matter how lonely or forlorn we might be, God is giving us power and strength to be the Canaanite woman. God is giving us faith, even when it looks like we have no faith.

"Lord, Jesus, have mercy on me," cried the Canaanite woman. That is the prayer of faith. That is the prayer of good faith. It comes from the chosen and the un-chosen, even from people we do not think of as the people of God. "Lord, have mercy on us." The prayer comes even from us when we are forgotten. We are the Canaanite woman, when we remember the forgotten saints of good faith.

AMEN.

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