

The Woman Who Wouldn't Go Away (15:21-39)

Pray. Question: was **Jesus racist?** (Did that get your attention?) Was Jesus racist? Is it possible that Jesus of Nazareth—a Jewish man from a Jewish family who grew up in Jewish contexts—could be prejudiced *against non-Jewish* people? Now, **if you've been around** City Church very long, and know what we believe about Jesus, you probably already know how we're going to answer that question. We believe here that Jesus was the perfect, sinless son of God. And we believe that racism—prejudice against certain people based on the color of their skin—is blatantly *sinful*. So you likely know where we're going to land on this.

But I bring up the question **because our passage today**—at least the first half of it—does at least raise that *question* in many modern people's minds. Such that, a few years back, there was actually a series of videos online where seemingly bright people made the case that this story is an example of how Jesus learned to overcome his racial prejudice. And as much as I disagree with their *conclusion* about this passage, I *can* at least understand how they *arrived* there.

Because there's no doubt about it: verses 21-28 sound *odd* to our modern ears. In the story, there is a Gentile (i.e. non-Jewish) woman approaching Jesus with a request for healing. And Jesus' *response* to her, at first, is *silence*. That seems weird. Then he makes this cryptic statement about how he was sent only to *Israel*. Which at first glance, at least looks like he is saying “no” to helping her, on the basis of her ethnicity. And then, he does this thing where he *seems* to refer to her (or at least her people) as *dogs*. So let's just **call a spade a spade:** this is an *odd* story. On first read, there is *so much* of this passage that seems to rub against the portrait we have of who Jesus was.

But I also think **if we're willing to think well** about this passage—if we're willing to wade through the difficult portions of it—it has some important things to show us about the nature of the kingdom of God, and the *specifics* of what Jesus calls “faith.” But all of that to say, we do have our work cut out for us this morning. So let's dive in and see what we can figure out together. Look with me at **Matthew 15**, starting in v. 21:

[21] Leaving that place (the place where he had last week's interaction with the Pharisees), *Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon.* *[22] A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, “Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is demon-possessed and suffering terribly.”*

So Matthew starts the story by telling us that **Jesus moves on from a region** that was primarily *Jewish*, to primarily *Gentile*: the region of Tyre and Sidon. And that becomes

the *setting* for his interaction with someone that Matthew refers to only as a “Canaanite” woman.” Now, that’s interesting language for Matthew to use. Because Canaanite was a term that, at the time of this writing, had mostly fallen out of use. It wasn’t a *slur* or anything, but it also wasn’t the usual term used to describe people from this region. The modern term would’ve been to call her a *Syrophonecian* woman.

Matthew calling her a **Canaanite woman calls our attention**, as readers, to the long, ugly history between the Jewish people and the Canaanites. Long story short, the Canaanites throughout the Scriptures were a group of people often given to sin, violence, and injustice—including some really *brutal* things like child sacrifice. The Jewish people were *God’s* people, but through the years, were often caught up into the sin and injustice of the Canaanites. So there is no love lost between these two groups of people. I know we’ve got our own divisions in America right now. But to be honest, none of them contain the amount of *history* and *vitriol* present between these two groups of people. No Jewish person would want anything to do with a Canaanite person. And no Jewish person would ever think that a Canaanite would want anything to do with the God of Israel.

But right off the bat, this woman in our story seems to *defy* all those expectations. She calls Jesus, “Lord, Son of David.” *Lord* was just a title of respect. But “Son of David” was a very *specific* title that recognized the *true identity* of Jesus—that he was the *Messiah*, the long awaited king of Israel. Which is interesting because thus far in Matthew’s gospel, only a *couple* people have *recognized* that about Jesus. The disciples only *recently* started thinking that way about him, and they’ve been spending every waking hour with him. **People in general, and Jewish people specifically, are still very unsure of Jesus’ identity—but this Gentile woman evidently has complete confidence in it.** So already, we notice that there is something *incredibly unique* about this woman and her view of Jesus. Something that *Jesus* intends to draw out.

But *nonetheless*, v. 23...

[23] *Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, “Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.”*

No doubt, *silence is a very unusual response* from Jesus. He doesn’t really have a habit of giving people the silent treatment when they need something from him. In fact, three weeks ago, we read a story about how even in a moment of *personal tragedy*, Jesus still heals and feeds thousands of people. Jesus really *never* turns genuine, earnest people away in their moment of need. But here, at first, he is silent.

So much so that the disciples feel like they need to address it. They bring it to Jesus' attention and try to get him to send the woman away. Now, notice what they *don't* say. They don't say "Jesus, don't you hear this woman? You should heal her daughter, like she asked." They just want her to go away. And you'll note that this isn't the *first* time the disciples want to send people in need away because they consider them burdens. But Jesus chooses *not* to send *this* woman away. Instead, he delivers *this* line, v. 24:

[24] He answered, "I was sent **only to the lost sheep of Israel.**"

Okay, so what does Jesus *mean* by this statement? Well, maybe let's start with **one thing he can't mean**. He *can't* mean "sorry—I don't heal or help non-Jewish people." It can't mean that because Jesus has *already, in the gospel of Matthew, healed and helped multiple non-Jewish people.*¹ And will *continue* to do so. Whatever he *is* saying, he *can't* be saying *that*, or else he has already broken his own rule. So what *does* he mean?

Well what's interesting to me is that **while this statement from Jesus certainly isn't a "yes,"** it also isn't *exactly* a "no." It's a *statement*. It's **kind of like** this. My six-year-old son asks me every night, without fail, if he can have dessert *before* he's finished his dinner. And usually I respond by saying "you have to finish dinner to get dessert." That's not exactly a yes, because I'm telling him he can't have dessert *yet*. But it's also not exactly a *no*. Because I'm making him an implicit *guarantee* that if and when he *does* finish his dinner, he *can* have dessert. So **it's not exactly a yes or a no—it's a statement about how things work, that applies to his question.** Does that make sense?

Okay. I think that's pretty **similar to what Jesus does here** in the passage. He offers a *statement that applies* to the woman's question. And specifically, it's a statement that **invites further conversation** and *action from* her. If he would've just said "no, I won't help you," the conversation is over. But the way he puts it, it at least leaves the door *open* for her to respond. Which she *does*, v. 25:

[25] *The woman came and knelt before him.* (Notice the *persistence*: she runs ahead and kneels in front of Jesus and the disciples, such that they will have to walk *around* her to keep going.) "**Lord, help me!**" she said.

She **simply won't take no** for an answer. So take a look at Jesus' response, v. 26:

[26] He replied, "**It is not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs.**"

¹ Matthew 8:5-13 & Matthew 8:28-34, for example.

So this is **likely the most difficult part** of the passage for us to comprehend. Jesus responds like he often responds to people—with a sort of *parable* related to the woman's request. And *in* the parable, Jesus *appears* to refer to the woman—or at least to Gentile people *in general*—as “dogs.” So **some clarifications** are in order.

First, we have to remember that this parable is **just that: it's a parable**. So even if it still seems like odd language to us, a *parable* is a little different than just saying to this woman, “get out of here, you dog.” There is room for language like this within the framework of an illustrative story. For example, let's say **you and I are co-workers**, and we are debating whether it's more important for employees to work *patiently and deliberately*, or to work *quickly and efficiently*. In that conversation, I might bring up the well-known illustration of the **tortoise and the hare**. And if you responded to that with “excuse me!? Are you saying we're nothing more than *animals*!? You *racist*!” then I would probably tell you that you were misunderstanding what I was saying. That story wasn't me trying to insult either of us by calling us *animals*—it was me trying to illustrate a principle to you through a story that *contains* animals. Jesus, with *his* statement, is *also* trying to illustrate a principle.

Second, I do think it's worth noting that **Jesus does not abide by our modern unwritten rules of outrage culture**. Nor *should* he. We talked at length about this last week, but you and I live in a society that loves to be offended at everything all of the time, whether or not there's actually something to be offended by. Jesus simply refuses to play by those rules. And what's *more*, he *seems* to operate with a sort of **“good faith” understanding**. He *assumes* that the other person is willing to try to understand *him*, and *he* tries to understand the other person. Now *I* would argue that characteristic of *Jesus* is something we could stand to *learn* from, and not...well, be *offended* by. And along those lines, I do think it's **worth pointing out**: the woman in the story *doesn't actually get offended*! She simply continues the conversation with Jesus. So let's not be so *arrogant* as modern Americans to lecture other people on what *they* should be offended by, as if we are the authorities on their lives and experiences. Fair?

Now, **with all that said: before we continue** in the story, this feels like a good time to remind you that **present for this whole interaction are at least twelve Jewish male disciples, who likely are given towards prejudiced attitudes towards non-Jewish people**. On several occasions in the gospels, they make those prejudices *known* to Jesus and to others. And in fact, they've already asked Jesus to send *this* woman away because she's bothering them with her requests. So **here's my question: is it possible that this interaction happens as much for the benefit of the disciples-watching-it-go-down, as it does for the benefit of the woman and her daughter?** Is it possible

that Jesus interacts with this woman the way he does because he wants to show the *disciples* something they are misunderstanding about his kingdom? I would argue it's *very possible*.

And **more, it would be very consistent with Jesus' M.O. for him to do that.** Jesus, on several occasions, wants to show the people around him that his kingdom is not *limited* to Israel. Sometimes he just comes out and says it outright.² But often, it doesn't seem like his disciples are getting the message. So **in *this story*, it seems like Jesus would rather *show* that reality to the disciples than he would *tell* them. Instead of *telling* them that faith is possible for Gentiles, he wants the woman's actions to *demonstrate* to them that it's possible.** He senses that she has the faith to demonstrate that, and he is using this dialogue with her to draw it out.

Which is **exactly what happens.** Remember, Jesus just told the parable about how it's not right to take the children's bread and toss it to the dogs. *She* replies, v. 27:

*[27] "Yes it is, Lord," she said. "Even the **dogs** eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."* She accepts Jesus' parable, but then challenges its conclusion. Which elicits this response from Jesus, v. 28: *[28] Then Jesus said to her, "Woman, you have **great faith!** Your request is **granted.**" And her daughter was healed **at that moment.***

So ~~Jesus has a regular habit of doing this~~ in the gospels. He would hold up ~~non-Jewish~~ people as examples of *faith*, in ~~contrast~~ to the skepticism and doubt of many ~~Jewish~~ people. He would marvel, usually ~~in front of~~ Israelites, at the incredible *faith* of non-Israelites. And here he does it ~~again~~. **He's trying to get the disciples to see that their categories for the kingdom are too small. That the people they consider *least able to understand the kingdom*, are *sometimes the ones most in tune with it.*** The kingdom is available to more than just them and their people; it's available to *all*.

And **then, Matthew gives us a second story** that confirms all of this. We'll move through *this* one pretty quickly, v. 29:

*[29] Jesus left there and went along the **Sea of Galilee** (so slightly different place, but still in *Gentile* territory). Then he went up on a mountainside and sat down. [30] **Great crowds** came to him, bringing the lame, the blind, the crippled, the mute and many others, and laid them at his feet; and he **healed them.** [31] The people were amazed when they saw the mute speaking, the crippled made well, the lame*

² See passages like Matthew 10:8-13 and Matthew 11:20-24, for example.

walking and the blind seeing. And they **praised the God of Israel** (remember that language for later). [32] Jesus called his disciples to him and said, “I have **compassion for these people**; they have already been with me three days and have nothing to eat. I **do not want to send them away hungry, or they may collapse on the way.**” (at this point things should start to sound a little familiar to us) [33] His disciples answered, “**Where could we get enough bread in this remote place to feed such a crowd?**” // [34] “**How many loaves do you have?**” Jesus asked. “Seven,” they replied, “and a few small fish.” [35] He told the crowd to sit down on the ground. [36] Then he took the seven loaves and the fish, and when he had given thanks, he broke them and gave them to the disciples, and they in turn to the people. [37] They **all ate and were satisfied.** Afterward the disciples picked up seven basketfuls of broken pieces that were left over. [38] The number of those who ate was four thousand men, besides women and children. [39] After Jesus had sent the crowd away, he got into the boat and went to the vicinity of Magadan.

Now, if *this* part of our passage **sounds like something we’ve already read** in Matthew, that’s because it basically *is*. It reads *almost identically* to the story we read three weeks ago, in Matthew 14, about Jesus feeding the five thousand. Matthew has intentionally structured these two stories to *mirror* each other. But that said, they’re not *identical*. There are **a few key differences**.

First, the number of people, and the *amount* of food, are slightly different. **Second**, and this one is really just because I think it’s funny: **Jesus’ interaction with the disciples** is a little different. If you remember back in Matthew 14, the disciples come to Jesus and say he needs to send the crowds *away*, because there’s not enough food. Jesus then has to show them that there *is* enough food, because he can use whatever they’ve got to feed the crowds.

But **here in chapter 15**, the interaction with the disciples reads a little different. *Here*, it says *Jesus* initiates the conversation. And in the conversation, **he tries his absolute hardest to help them see that they’re in the same situation as what happened less than a week ago**. Like, tries so *hard*. He’s using the same *language* even.

He **brings everybody in**, and has this almost **kindergarten teacher-esque** moment with them. He says, “Okay guys, let’s recap the situation here. There are lots of people here, just like there were a week ago. I have *compassion* on *these* people, like I did the people a week ago. They all need to *eat*, like the people a week ago. I don’t want to send them *away*, just like I didn’t want to send the people away a week ago. Does this situation sound *familiar* to anybody? Does anybody have any ideas on a solution for all of this?”

Maybe...I don't know...like we solved the exact same problem a week ago? Any ideas? Anyone?!" Like, he's trying so *hard* to set these disciples up for success.

But **do they see it?!** Do the disciples get the connection? Nope, not even a little bit. Their response is "yeah yeah yeah—we hear you Jesus, but where are we going to get enough food for everybody?!" I don't know if Jesus ever facepalmed, but if he did, this was the moment to do it. He literally set the ball on a tee for them, squared them up to it, handed them a bat, and then they went and threw the bat in the trash. ~~And then came and asked Jesus where they could get a bat. I think I'm overextending the metaphor.~~ But do you see this? Do you see the almost comedic failure of this moment on the disciples' part? But the ever patient, ever kind Jesus just takes it in stride and says to them, "okay—how many loaves do you have?" And he feeds the crowds once again, with just a small amount of food. That's the *second* difference between this passage, and Matthew 14.

But **the final difference** between the two stories is arguably the most *important* one. And it's this: the *type* of people that make up the crowd. Back at the end of v. 31, it says that when Jesus healed the crowds, they responded by **"praising the God of Israel."** Now, why would Matthew need to say *which God* they praise? We've pretty much only been talking about *one God* here in Matthew, right? So why does he need to specify that it's the God of *Israel here*? Because it's not *Israelites* who are praising him. It's *Gentiles*. The people Jesus healed and fed in Matthew 14 were *Jewish* people. The people *here* are *Gentiles*. **In Matthew 14, the point was that Jesus was the bread of life for Jewish people. Here, Jesus is trying to show the disciples that he is the bread of life for everybody else, too.**

And I want you to *think* about that **in the greater context of our entire passage**. So Jesus just told a parable, to a Gentile woman, about *bread*. And her response was that even "dogs" (i.e. *Gentiles*) eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table. *Here*, Jesus *confirms* that belief by feeding thousands of *Gentile people* with (fish, and...) bread crumbs. Do you see the *connection*? **Jesus is fulfilling the woman's interpretation of the parable. He is the bread of life for everyone, everywhere, just like she said that he was.** Cool story, right?

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So with all of that unpacked, **let's do what we usually do**. With the little bit of time we have left, let's ask what this story has to say to you and I today. We probably aren't as wrapped up in the Jewish-Canaanite controversy as Jesus and his disciples were. So what does this text mean for *us*? I've got a couple for us to consider. I think in this story, we learn about two things. First, we learn about...

The Breadth of God's Kingdom

Both of these stories point directly to just **how broad the availability of God's kingdom truly is**. *Jew and Gentile. Male and female*. Everyone, everywhere can be welcomed into the kingdom of God. Regardless of their heritage, their past, their ethnicity, their gender. The kingdom of God is *for all and available to all*. And while that may not seem like that groundbreaking of a statement to *us today*, it absolutely *was* in Jesus' day. It would've come as a bit of a shock to both *Jews* and *Gentiles* alike. Male and female alike. In fact, that's sort of the point of the first half of the passage: the *disciples* saw this woman as nothing more than an *annoyance*, while Jesus sees her as an example of *faith* for them to learn from.

And I think **part of the reason this doesn't strike us** as groundbreaking is because it aligns so much with *our* existing cultural values. *Inclusivity* is a *virtue* in nearly all corners of our society today. So when we see Jesus including people from all backgrounds and all walks of life, it reads to us as *normal* and *appropriate*, rather than *shocking* and *offensive*. But it wouldn't have seemed *normal* in Jesus' day. There's a *reason* the disciples and others are constantly trying to lecture Jesus on who he should and shouldn't hang around.

So, just as **a thought experiment**: imagine you walk up to Market Square one day, and there at one of the public tables is Jesus of Nazareth, sharing a meal with some people. Just hanging out. And once you do a little more investigating, you find out that the people he was eating with were some combination of convicted criminals, known sex offenders, pedophiles, and...I don't know...some members of the Proud Boys. And Jesus is just sharing a meal with them, catching up on life, like ya do. How would that make you *feel*?

Okay, **now we're at least a lot closer** to how you likely would have responded to Jesus' behavior if you were around in *his* day. You wouldn't have thought "wow—I love how *inclusive and accepting* Jesus is. I always *knew* he was like that." You would've thought "that's not how you do that." And maybe you're thinking, "well no—it's just that by him hanging out with *those* types of people, others might think that Jesus *approved* of and *condoned* their behavior, which he doesn't. *That's* why I'd be uncomfortable with it." But then you realize that's *exactly* what made people uncomfortable with it back *then*, too.

Here's my point: God's kingdom casts a *wide* net. **The edges of the invitation to his kingdom are further out than most of us would prefer to believe. Which means chances are, it includes quite a few people that we wouldn't naturally include. Jesus doesn't overlook any person's sin. But his life, death, and resurrection have made a way for anyone who trusts in him and forsakes their sin to be invited in.**

Regardless of who they are, or *what they've done*. And when we pretend as if there's something more than that *required*—like there are more roadblocks than that to enter in—we end up looking a lot like the disciples who want to send people away—people that *Jesus* wants to welcome in. *Jesus* does not need us to tell him who he's allowed to include and who he isn't. The invitation to his kingdom is as wide as the sky. *Following Jesus* is narrow, to be sure, but the *invitation* is *broad*.

Now I will say: it's **one thing to believe** all that about *Jesus*; it's entirely another thing to practice it *yourself*. It's quite another thing to live a life where you seek out, welcome, and invite in the people that are the most *unlike you*. Those you are most inclined to write off, or exclude, or at least *avoid* in group settings. It's one thing to believe that *God* would befriend the difficult person at your work; it's another thing for *you* to befriend them. It's one thing to believe that *God* would pursue the person in your LifeGroup who is a very different background, life stage, or ethnicity than you; it's another thing for *you* to pursue that person. But *if* we're followers of *Jesus*, the Scriptures call us to “welcome others as Christ welcomed us.”³ To follow him *into* all that, as a testament to the *breadth* of *God's* kingdom.

That's one thing this passage is about. And **second**, in this passage we also learn about...

The Persistence of Faith

At the core of our passage today is the story of a Canaanite woman who simply **wouldn't go away**. There were racial barriers discouraging her from even approaching *Jesus*, but she never gave up. There were *disciples* who didn't want her bothering *them or Jesus*, but she persevered. She's even met initially with what likely *seemed* like reluctance from *Jesus*, but she persisted. She's the woman who *wouldn't* go away.

And **whatever you do: do not miss what *Jesus* calls that persistence.** What does he *call it at the end*? One word: *faith*. His response to her persistence is to say, in front of the disciples, and anyone else listening, “Woman, *you* have *great faith*.” And no doubt that description, “*great faith*,” is chosen **in deliberate contrast** to the two chapters on *either side* of this story, where *Jesus* calls his *disciples* those of “*little faith*.” ***Jesus* is trying to use this interaction with a Canaanite woman to call his disciples into something bigger and better than where they currently are. He wants *them* too to marvel at, and then *imitate*, this woman's faith.**

³ See Romans 15.

So **faith is evidently modeled** sometimes by *persistence*. It reminds me of another time in the gospels where Jesus makes the same point. He tells his disciples a story about how they “should always pray and *not* give up.” And the story he tells is about a *persistent widow*. A woman who was being taken advantage of financially and legally. And her response was that she *would not stop* going to the judge and *insisting* that he give her justice. Day by day, night by night, she simply wouldn’t *give up*.⁴ **These are the types of stories that, for Jesus, exemplify faith.**

Which is **interesting to me, because sometimes** I think we envision *faith* as a sort of a **silent resolve**. The ability to withstand difficult scenarios with a subtle smile on our face and a quiet optimism in our voice. And *sometimes* that is what faith looks like. But evidently, the type of faith Jesus marvels at sometimes looks a lot *more* like outspoken, stubborn, *persistence*. Like coming to God with a request and *refusing* to take no for an answer. It looks like praying for the same thing, over and over again, until it happens. It looks like going to Jesus and saying “Jesus—I have a problem that only you can solve. I have a person that only you can heal. I have an issue that only *you* can address. And I’m asking—and I’m going to *keep* asking—that you do it.”

Now **there are unhealthy ways** to go about that, to be sure. We can do it in *arrogant* ways, where we refuse to accept that God may see things differently than us. There’s a way to view Jesus simply as a personal *genie*—someone who exists simply to fulfill your every wish. But notice **that’s not what the Canaanite woman is doing** in the passage at all. She starts with a recognition of who Jesus is and his authority—calling him “Lord” and “son of David.” And **she’s not coming to him asking for a nicer house or a cooler car or for a little extra cash for spending**. She is pleading for the *healing* and *restoration* of her daughter. I think all of that *shapes* why Jesus calls her actions *faith* and not *arrogance* or *selfishness*.

But still, **don’t let any of that soften the audacity** of her actions. She is approaching a man society told her not to approach and choosing to enter into dialogue with him, when all cultural conventions would tell her *not* to do any of that. She is approaching the Messiah, the son of God, and having the boldness to not just ask, but *insist* that he meet her need. That, to many of *us*, feels like overreaching. It feels *presumptive*. But to her and to Jesus, it was an expression of *faith*. Of trust in the type of person Jesus was and the types of things he was capable of.

I wonder what would happen if we approached Jesus like this. **I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time praying repeatedly** about *anything*. I have a tendency to ask God

⁴ Luke 18:1-8

for something *once*, and if it doesn't happen, just assume that he's not interested in doing whatever that thing is. I think I might be one of those people that Jesus calls "you of *little* faith." And that's not to say he doesn't love me or care about me. Jesus showed *tremendous* love and patience and understanding to his disciples—he *used* them to do incredible things. But still, time and time again, he called them those of "little faith." And he used examples of *great* faith to call them into something better.

And **I wonder this morning** if Jesus doesn't want to call *many* of us with *little* faith up into *great* faith. I wonder if he wants to teach *us*, like he taught the disciples, through the example of a woman who wouldn't go away. So let me just tell you, as we wrap up, *where* that kind of faith comes from. It *starts* exactly where it started for the Canaanite woman: in her understanding of *who Jesus was*.

Her motivation for approaching Jesus wasn't her *experiences*. It wasn't her *circumstances*. It wasn't what prayers *had* or *hadn't* been answered for her in the past. And it certainly wasn't in who *she* was or her standing in society. **She was asking because she knew who Jesus was.** "Lord." "Son of David." The *Messiah*. **She asked Jesus because she knew Jesus.** And because she *knew* Jesus, she could not fathom a scenario in which he wouldn't hear. She asked Jesus because she could not fathom a circumstance in which Jesus did not want to help.

She **threw herself on the character** and trustworthiness of God, and wouldn't let go until he did what he was capable of doing. She said in her heart, with the Psalmist in ch. 27:

*I remain confident of this: I will see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living.*⁵

That's where persistence comes from. Not "I *might* see the goodness of the Lord." Not "I *hope* I'll see the goodness of the Lord." Not "*maybe* I'll see the goodness of the Lord." None of that. "I *will* see the goodness of the Lord, because of *who he is*. It might not look like what I thought it would look like. It might not feel like I want it to feel. But I know who *he is*, and I *know* what he's capable of." May God grant each of *us* such great faith.

Let's pray.

⁵ Psalm 27:13