



August 16, 2020

Great Is Your Faith

The Reverend Dr. John A. Dalles

Psalm 67; Matthew 15:21-28

I have seen the photograph. You may have seen it, too. Taken by W. Eugene Smith for his *Pittsburgh Project* in the 1950s, it is a photo of a street sign, and a woody hillside, and a vintage Studebaker. The street sign says "Dream Street" — a street right here in Pittsburgh. Smith, a professional photographer, was in Pittsburgh on assignment. He took memorable photos of our city, 60-plus years ago, in glorious black and white. They live in memory. They record the Pittsburgh that once was.

I wonder what you would photograph today, if you were given an assignment to photograph Pittsburgh, to communicate to the outside world what our city is? Would it be famous landmarks? Would it be ordinary people? Would it be the way we live now, socially distanced, wearing masks? Would it be the rivers, the hills? Would it be the hospitals, the homes, the churches? Would it be the stadiums and theaters? Would it be the Parkway and Route 28? Would it be Amberson Avenue and Westminster Place? Would it be Dream Street?

How do dreams match reality? The woman who came to Jesus was a dreamer who had a very practical purpose. She dreamed of better things for her daughter. She made the effort in spite of the fact that she was, according to many, unworthy of Jesus' attention.

Christ Himself takes us to the tottering edge of insult in His response, comparing a person to a dog. Dog lovers would be fine with that. We like it that, over time, we even start looking like our dogs. But it was not so in the time of Jesus. Dogs were there, part of the landscape. But, other than those that worked, such as sheep dogs, they were mostly underappreciated. To compare a person to a dog would not sit well with you or with me. Perhaps this woman found it off-putting, too.

If she did, she did not let it show. The woman's dream was so vivid, so real, and so necessary, that she responded respectfully and even humorously. Humble as they are, dogs do get some of the crumbs from the master's table. All she wants, all that will fulfill her fondest wishes, all that would put her on Dream Street, are those few crumbs. If you were a person of Jesus' time and place, and someone was referred to as a Canaanite woman, where would the emphasis be: a **Canaanite woman** or **Canaanite woman**? In either case, in Jesus' time and place, both "Canaanite" and "woman," were descriptive words that would have diminished who the person was. They would have erased the realness of her — her true humanity.

Now I know someone can say "Well, that just tells us where she was from and what gender she was." Yes, it does tell us that. Then again, it tells us something else — something that we should pay attention to whenever we are interacting with others. In Jesus' day, if you said "Canaanite woman" to fellow Jews, they would have thought of the most famous Canaanite woman: Delilah, who brought Samson to such a sad end. Within that phrase, you would have found judgment, and the judgment would have been negative. Therefore, automatically, the person would have been unworthy of consideration. So, just by saying "Canaanite woman," it is a phrase that diminishes. Moreover, we remember that the status of women in Jesus' day was low. Even if a few women managed to overcome that reality, it was still the reality. So, there she was; someone who is automatically classified as an outsider.

I wonder what the equivalent of that moment, then, would be today? In other words, who might be an outsider, a person that others might refer to as unworthy? A dog, even. It sounds shocking doesn't it? But all too often, people are categorized in a way that dehumanizes them. It takes away their individuality and hides their personhood. It is a practice that erases them, that puts them in a second-class situation. Can we agree that we do not want to do that? That we are at the point in our lives where we are beyond that? Where our goal is to see each person, really

see them. To see them as having been created by God — as a child of God, as loved by God; and, therefore, worthy of our attention, worthy of our respect, worthy of being treated with dignity and with fairness.

The woman with the dream is bold. She had plenty of chutzpah. She is not just courageous. There is an energy and an eagerness that goes along with it. I admire her. I suspect that you admire her, too. She is really a force to be reckoned with. And she does it with an air of good humor. The woman with the dream is wise. She has her eye on the objective, which is receiving the healing that she knows that Jesus can give — if He so chooses. So, she did not let it get in her way that Canaanites were not held in good regard. She knew that; but any personal feelings that she might have felt, in the way of frustration, anger, or disappointment, she put to one side. And, having put them aside, she moved forward in a way that led to a happy conclusion of her story.

That may not be a perfect model of how to get things done, but it is not a bad one. The proof is in the results. Her daughter is healed immediately. The dream becomes reality. So, there are several miracles that are going on. One of them is the healing of the daughter. But the other is the effectiveness of the mother. We will be wise to note this is an opening up of the reach of righteousness where Jesus is concerned. Yes, He came to care for the lost sheep of Israel. But His care extends further beyond that — and further and further, as we Christians have continued in our role down through history and up until today.

It is fair to say that although there have been setbacks, there have been bad situations, and there have been frustrations along the way, on the whole, the effect of true Christians upon the world has been beneficial. Healing of individuals and society have resulted. Dreams have become reality. In this event — between the Lord and the woman with a dream — we have a “signal” of the unfolding, unheard-of grace of God, where there is neither Jew nor Gentile; where boundaries slip away; where dreams are fulfilled.

How do dreams match reality?

Here in Pittsburgh, Dream Street exists only on paper, today.

You could go looking for it. You might even arrive at the place where it was located. The place is all gone to seed and covered with weeds. Nobody lives on Dream Street anymore. And that is a shame, because people still have dreams. Their dreams seem, to them, impossible — unless, with wisdom and some good humor, they place them in Jesus’ hands.

Wherever you find yourself this week, I hope that you will find yourself helping others fulfill their dreams — that you will see that is a part of your calling. You might even ask someone, “What is it that you really dream for, long for?” Rather than assume that you know, ask them, and then listen. After they have told you their dreams, ask another question: “How can I help you get to Dream Street?” Amen.