

## Beyond Faith

*Mt 15, 21-28*

“And her daughter was healed instantly.” It took her a few days to come around. The whole time it seemed like she was just about to have another attack. But time went by, and the attacks didn’t come. Finally, she made the decision to leave the house and go outside. She would walk for hours around the city, and sometimes even beyond the city limits; filled with melancholy, she would clamber up a nearby hill and look on the people below - as small as ants. It was impossible to go out any further – her mother wouldn’t let her. She always wanted to know exactly where her daughter was. And the girl herself was a little bit scared – the memory of her illness was too vivid, and she feared that she would do something not quite right and end up falling down again in convulsions, foaming at the mouth. And this time there wouldn’t be anyone around. She was braver than her mother in any case, though. Her mother always held her breath whenever her daughter would take off out of the yard – “You be careful,” she’d shout out after her every time, “God was merciful to you last time...but don’t test Him! Be careful!” Sometimes it seemed to the daughter that her mother was even more worried about her now than before...

When the time came for her to get married, her mother didn’t want to hear anything about any young men – spousal duties, work around the house, kids.... No, her daughter couldn’t handle any of these burdens and worries. The daughter, as it turns out, didn’t even resist very much. She was prepared to sacrifice a lot just as long as the illness didn’t return. In the end, the mother sent her to the nearest monastery, where she lived out the rest of her days in relative happiness; she wasn’t especially notable as a nun with zealous piety, but on the other hand didn’t shirk any of her responsibilities – she didn’t miss a single liturgy and industriously followed the daily regime. It’s not that it was particularly joyful, but it was better, at least, than the torturous fits that came with her disease. They even asked her to be the abbess, but she resolutely refused – she valued her calm and moderate life too much. She was too worried about her health.

Frequently, almost every day, her mother would, groaning, crawl up to the monastery church, where she would stand for hours in front of the icon of the Savior, praying to Him according to the Old Church Slavonic prayerbook, that her daughter’s illness would not return, that she would remain and stay healthy. He likes it, after all, when people beg of him. It is necessary to pray, pray all the time, pray constantly, pray according to all the rules. Jesus’ face on the icon was always looking at her in the eyes, and that was so good, so very good! After all, she remembered all too clearly how long she cried out her plea to him as He was walking away...And that’s what he called

then “great faith.” Yes, that kind of faith is not necessary anymore; an icon is better – an icon and steady, calm, moderate prayer!

“And her daughter was healed instantly.” Neither of them could even comprehend the bounds of their happiness. The laughter, the tears, the endless embraces and exclamations of unbridled joy. Gradually, the excitement settled down. And how happy, how full the life of the daughter became now! She got so much happiness simply from physical work around the house and in the field! And how much energy she had left after the working day was done – she could spend the whole night walking around the village surrounded by the local boys. How wonderful it was to lay down to sleep as morning was already approaching, knowing that the sleep would be sound and that you’d wake up at sunrise filled with energy. It was already hard to believe that this young and healthy body, full of energy, and this quick and sharp mind (inherited from her mother) once suffered from a horrible disease. She bought a small cross necklace in the nearest church to remind her about the one who saved her from suffering. Yes, thanks to Him, to His miraculous power and kindness, her life was in full swing – work which she enjoyed, dances every Saturday night until she dropped from exhaustion, the timid caresses of neighborhood boys, embarrassed by their own impudence, and back to work and school lessons again. She was accepted at the college she wanted to attend. There she got all “A’s” and enjoyed the amenities of big city life. She had a wonderful career working for a well-known company and a happy marriage. She didn’t go to church. They said strange things about Jesus there. Everything was too complicated and depressing. It turned out that there were too many good things in this life that you had to deny yourself of. But sometimes in the evening she would look at her cross and quietly whisper “Thank you.”

Her mother also bought a small icon and hung it on the wall next to the other holy images and amulets. She hung it in the place of honor – it was He, after all, who showed her the most mercy in life. When conflicting rumors about Jesus started going around the village, she always stood up for Him; she’d leave if others started talking badly about Him in her presence. No matter Who He was, He helped her daughter! Her life was so filled with goodness then and, if not happiness, then at least peace. Everything worked out, everything took its normal course. She wasn’t worried about her daughter and was proud of her. She saved the photographs that she sent her in a big, pretty photo album. Now she had more time for her other children and grandchildren. Once she happened upon the holy book of the Christians. There she was surprised to read about herself and about her meeting with Jesus. The story ended with the healing of her daughter. What strange people they are! Instead of ending the story that way, they should have used it as the beginning – to tell the story of what a good, pleasant and full life they had after that. That is the most important thing, after all. That was the reason she ran after Jesus.

It was a strange story. But the moment itself was written more or less accurately. Though, now, after so many years of sunshine, it was hard to believe that at one time she, full of tears, had ran after that strange preacher, crying out her plea, that she had stood before Him in despair, already without almost any doubt that He would reject her, and that she was surprised then at His words: “O woman, great is your faith.” What does faith have to do with it? The important thing was her daughter and her health! Even now she couldn’t understand what faith had to do with it.

“And her daughter was healed instantly.” Having returned home, the mother looked upon her child with amazement – she almost didn’t recognize her. She embraced her and held her lips to the cool forehead. Exhausted by her last attack and shaken by new feelings, the girl accepted her caresses almost passively. “We need to leave this place,” the mother said, quietly but firmly. The girl didn’t answer, just foggily gazed on the sunken eyes of her mother, burning with some sort of gloomy fire. It didn’t take long to pack their things. They left for a new village. They lived with her sister, and then, step by step, made a home of their own.

When the girl, having grown up, asked her mother why they left then, the mother answered monosyllabically – “In order to forget about everything and start everything anew!”

The daughter thought that she meant her long-left-behind illness. The mother thought all the time about her inconceivable humiliation. How that miracle-worker had taunted her! First he had acted as if he didn’t notice her, and then he called her and her daughter dogs. She had been prepared for anything for her daughter’s sake – even for such humiliations. But how difficult it was to forget them! If He had only simply played with her, had laughed at her, then she could have simply cursed him and forgotten about everything. But He really did heal her daughter! And that made it all the worse. She accepted this gift from Him. But now she needed to forget at what cost she got the gift! To leave, to start a new life! That helped very little, though. Sometimes at night, sitting with a bottle of wine, she would pound on the table with all her might, waking up her deep-sleeping daughter. And then, hearing her cry, she would run to the bedroom in order to cover her daughter’s face with hot, drunken kisses.

Her daughter grew into a normal child. She had the regular colds, the regular “C’s” in school. Then a technical school... followed by pregnancy and marriage (in that order) – she had to work hard on the dress so that it would cover her belly, at least a little. The family moved to a bigger town, had two rooms in a communal apartment. Washing, cleaning, fighting, empty vodka bottles in the corner. She died of complications when giving birth to her third child.

Her mother's eyes were dry at the funeral. It was strange and inconceivable, but she even felt a little bit of relief. Now, at least, she didn't owe him anything. Yet all the same, she thought to herself, if He would just show up now, she would do the exact same thing – fall down in front of Him, pray to Him to raise her daughter from the dead, to bring her from the tomb. But He didn't show up. Upon the new grave a simply wooden cross was raised. The priest said that He had died on such a cross... This staggered her. So be it – let it be. If she wanted to see anything at all when visiting her daughter's grave, let it be only this – a sign of humiliation. A sign that symbolizes her whole life. A sign that symbolizes, as it turns out, His life, too.

“O woman, how great is your faith!” She turned around abruptly. No, it wasn't Him. It was simply the priest who put his hand on her shoulder. He saw her dry eyes, saw how she stared constantly at the cross, heard how a quiet whisper broke out from her lips, “Have mercy on me, Son of David!” She apparently made quite an impression on this servant of God.

He was young, well-groomed, content with life. It appears that he happily follows his vocation. He sincerely tries to comfort and support her. He had a resolute face – if it gets difficult, he will follow his Lord to the end, to a martyr's death, without asking for anything. But for now he accepts the Lord's gifts with sincere and carefree gratitude. He loves Him with his whole heart.

“O woman, great is your faith” he says. But what does he know about faith?