

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Aug 20, 2017
Jesus and the Canaanite Woman (Matthew 15:21-28)

The Canaanites were a group hated by the Jews. The Canaanite woman in our Gospel story was challenged, but she confronted that challenge with tenacity and perseverance. And she achieved a miracle because of the courage of her conviction. What she learned was that God doesn't just love those who are like us. God's mercy extends to those who are different from us, to those whom we might even consider to be our enemy. Sometimes, those enemies may even have a deeper faith than we do – the kind of conviction that can work miracles.

The woman might have been a single mom with a special needs child, and she desperately needed Jesus' help. But Jesus' initial reaction to this desperate woman's request was no response at all. His disciples certainly did not want anything to do with the woman.

He could have ignored her and kept walking. But out of compassion for a person in great need Jesus stopped and turned to the woman and said that he had been sent to minister to the Jewish community, "only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." He repeated a saying of his day that "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs" - although he used the word "puppies" to soften it.

But this woman knows her place and accepts it. She has a good clue about who Jesus really is, and she knows God owes her nothing. But she is bold and persistent enough to get down on her knees before him and keep pleading her case.

And she answers Jesus in the same way he spoke to her when she says, "Yes, Lord, I am a little begging dog as you say. But even the little dogs get to eat the crumbs that the children drop from the table."

She accepts what he says about how he was first sent on his messianic mission to the chosen nation. She understands and consents to it, and she submits without questioning. She does not complain against his reasoning or argue about the fairness. She knows the power of the one to whom she is pleading.

This Canaanite woman allowed nothing to suffocate her faith. Her love for her daughter overcame any fear she may have had...she had within her the courage and boldness which nourished and strengthened her faith.

People on the fringe - that's what we might call them. People on the fringe of respectable society. These are not the good, upstanding people who have their act together and are living their best life now. These are people with problems in their lives. Jesus specialized in dealing with people on the fringe. He hung around with them. He was not ashamed to get to know them. He was a friend to them, and he showed them where to find the help they needed.

The Canaanite woman, is a good example of someone on the fringe....an outsider, but she comes to Jesus, and Jesus helps her. And although, at first, it looks like maybe he won't help, Jesus knows what he is doing.

Everything was wrong with that woman in Canaanite-Jewish relations: wrong gender, wrong religion, wrong nationality. But she still spoke up for her convictions because she believed that Jesus could heal her daughter.

She was able to use Jesus' saying as a tool after she was called a puppy. It was a good moment for her...she already had plenty of bad moments. Her daughter was possessed by a demon. There was nothing she wouldn't do for her little girl, even beg - anything to just get her some help.

She went on begging Jesus. "Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David. Help my little girl." She went on so long and loudly that it began to get on the nerves of the disciples and they resolved to do something about it. **Then they also came to Jesus begging,** saying, "Get rid of her. Tell her to go. She's becoming a nuisance. Besides, she is a foreigner. Have nothing to do with her. We've got a preaching engagement to make."

Here is a perfect example of the persistent prayer of faith. Believing that Jesus can help her, the woman is ready to catch any crumb that might fall from the table. She has withstood his test, and her faith is firm. **Jesus said to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be it done as you wish."** And Matthew records that her daughter was healed from that hour.

Jesus was constantly upsetting the status quo, and forcing people to think differently about themselves, and those around them. And here he does it again. We learn that faith can astonish us - miracles can happen. God's vision is so much greater than ours.

In the first reading, from Isaiah, we heard of how God embraces those "foreigners who join themselves to the Lord..." **In showing God's plan of love, mercy and salvation to all, we are reminded that "what is right" is an appreciation that God has made every human person equal and in the Divine image and likeness. To "do what is just" is to peacefully stand up for that belief, especially in the face of racism or actions that demean another person.** And the passage concludes with the beautiful words that I found out are inscribed in the National Cathedral in Washington, DC: **"My house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples."**

Then we sang the responsorial psalm and made that idea our own prayer: **"O God, let all the nations praise you!"**

And then we heard from Paul, writing to the Romans, and he celebrated the fact that he was an **apostle to the Gentiles**, one sent to those outside his own circle of belief. **Paul sees every person as worthy of God's love, "that God might have mercy on all."**

The readings remind us that those who may seem to be outside our circle aren't necessarily outside of God's circle. God's circle is limitless, and there is always room for more.

All of us, at one time or another, have been “outside the circle.” All of us have felt like foreigners: isolated, uncomfortable, like we don't belong. Remember our first day at a new school? Our first hours in a new job? Remember being bullied because we were different?

God never forgets it and God extends a hand to us, and to everyone seeking to be a part of this Divine circle. Are we willing to take what God has to offer - to “join ourselves to God”? Are we ready, like Peter and the Canaanite woman, to dare to believe what others would find unbelievable? Are we willing to extend to others the same kind of mercy that God extends to us? Can we accept those who are different? Are we willing to love those we've been taught to despise? They may be more like us than we realize.

God isn't finished with any of us yet. As we gather around this table for communion – people of every race, from every region – we gather literally in communion, bound by our love of the Lord and the Eucharist, and our own desire to be a part of this miracle.

We need to pray for those who may not be here yet – but who may be on their way. We need to pray for those seeking to join this circle – as Isaiah wrote, to “join themselves to the Lord.”

And we need to pray that we may be as merciful to one another as God is to us — because God isn't finished with any of us yet.

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August 20, 2017

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