

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Cycle A, 8.16.20

Isaiah 56:1,6-7/

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32/Matthew 15:21-28

No Longer “the Other” – We’re Parts of One Another

The elementary school I attended had no black kids. There were some Japanese kids and Mexican kids, but no blacks. I didn't encounter black kids until junior high and high school, where the school population was about ten per cent black, roughly comparable with the percentage of blacks in the United States as a whole.



There were black cheerleaders, pom-pom girls and class officers. We were friendly with each other but it was mutually understood that each was the “other.” There were few if any mixed race friendships outside the confines of school. At school assemblies, the black kids self-segregated to their own set of bleachers. In a very real sense, we were equal but separate. We were strangers to one another in all but the most superficial ways. But it was a start. Superficial was better than nothing.

Going to university in Louisiana, my main interaction with blacks was as a mentor to inner-city kids in Baton Rouge. It was interaction, to be sure, but, in an exercise of *noblesse oblige*, it reinforced blacks as the “other.” Then came the Army with its racial, social, economic and geographical diversity—a place where my

superiors, peers and subordinates were apt to be of a different race and background than me. Within the Army, racial otherness disappeared. My comrades on-duty and my friends off-duty were of all makes and models.

Later, the roles available to women in the Army were greatly expanded, seeming to threaten our heretofore all-male bastions. But, when it happened, women were simply added to the ranks of comrades on-duty and friends off-duty. For me it was a great awakening.



Another awakening was coming to a new understanding of homosexuality. I was a homophobe growing up. Just as race was never a topic of discussion in my home, neither was sexuality. In both cases, I was left to figure it all out on my own. Not only did I not personally know any gays, I didn't know of any in our school or community. I learned many years later that a couple of guys in our group of friends were gay. At the time, no one knew or suspected and I'm not sure they knew, such was the taboo against homosexuality.

Homosexuals were, in my mind, a frightening and predatory other who lurked around public bathrooms and highway rest stops waiting to pounce on unsuspecting innocents like myself. Then, when I was twenty-one, my wife's younger brother told us confidentially that he was gay. He wasn't frightening, he wasn't dangerous, he was just her pesky little brother who entrusted

us with his secret. In this encounter, another 'other' disappeared.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus encountering the other in the form of the Canaanite woman. Jesus has traveled north from Jewish Galilee to the non-Jewish region of Tyre and Sidon in present day Lebanon, presumably to preach to the Jews that lived in this marginal, hostile region. The Canaanites were traditional enemies of the Hebrews, having been displaced by them when the Hebrews took possession of their land. Furthermore, they were a pagan people who worshipped multiple gods. Desperate for help, the Canaanite woman asks Jesus to cure her daughter. At first he simply ignores her and says nothing. Then the disciples show up and request that Jesus send her away. As a way of explaining his position and his understanding, Jesus says that his mission is to Jews only and that this woman, a non-Jew, is not entitled to what he has to offer. In response to this rebuff the Canaanite woman says, "*Lord, help me*". These are the same words Peter used last Sunday when he was sinking into the Sea of Galilee and called out to Jesus. In response to Peter, Jesus immediately stretched out his hand and caught him, but in response to the woman he says, "*It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.*"



Yes, Jesus is referring to her as a dog and saying she isn't worthy of his ministry. Still refusing to give up, the woman replies, "*Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their*

masters." At that, Jesus praises her faith and grants her request.

But much more is happening than the granting of one woman's request. Through this encounter with the "other," Jesus comes to realize that his mission is to all God's people, not just to the people of his religion or tribe. Through her faith and persistence the Canaanite woman taught Jesus an important lesson.



I love this story because it shows us Jesus in all his humanity, struggling to understand, breaking out of pre-conceived notions, refusing ultimately to be bound by formulae and allowing himself to be taught by the other to lavish his love and compassion on all the children of God. The parable of the Good Samaritan is one of the most beloved of Jesus' parables, capturing the essence of what 'Love of Neighbor' means. It is hard to imagine that parable being told if not for Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Pope Francis has referred to us as "a pilgrim church." As members of the Church, we are likewise called to be pilgrims. Being a pilgrim is never static. We must be consciously and actively on our pilgrimage to God. Are our minds and hearts open to new challenges, new encounters with the other? Are we bound by pre-conceived notions or formulae, or are we always driven by God's love and compassion?

Only by remaining as 'Pilgrims on the Way'
will we complete that longest and most
exciting journey back home to God.



Buzz Sherwood