

Blessed Trinity Catholic Community + Spirit of Christ Mission
Twentieth Sunday Summer Ordinary time ~ A ~ August 16, 2026
Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8; Romans 11:15-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28
Homily ~ Fr. Ed Hislop



The Gospel today is more than a bit disturbing. In no other story does Jesus ignore and then insult a person who comes to him in need. Disturbing as it may seem, as strange as it appears, it reflects the depths of Jesus humanity, as well as “life” in the world of today. A man of his times, Jesus was a human being caught up in the cultural expectations and prejudices of his community, even as he consistently challenges the attitudes, politics and prejudices of his own people.

In this story he unexpectedly crosses the border to Tyre and Sidon, pagan communities of those days, a place Jews would not have been welcomed and a place no Jew would want to go. Matthew does not tell us why Jesus chose to go there. Perhaps he felt a need to cross the borders of his own comfort zone; maybe he wondered why people living there were perceived as so different that relationship with them could never really happen. It could be that he crossed over into another land, culture, religion, and way of life simply out of curiosity. Perhaps it was his own unconscious divine spirit which moved him to enter the lives, struggles, dreams, and hopes of a people his own nation felt

were less than human only because the Canaanite people were perceived as “those *others*.” Matthew seems to tell us in this instance that Jesus was a part of his own culture with its prejudice and desire for separation from those thought to be different or less worthy. Why he was there, we do not know. We can only speculate. What we do know, from the Gospel, is this: Jesus crosses the border with one attitude and leaves changed, converted, and with a whole new vision for his ministry. His humanity, with all its human strengths and weakness, and “built in” prejudices, is changed.

In this strange and alien land, he encounters a woman in pain and in need—in pain and need not just for herself but for her child—her daughter, tormented, she says, by a demon. Again, we do not know what kind of demon. Perhaps it was a demon of hatred, exclusion, or prejudice. Maybe a demon which saw women as less than men and whose lives were limited by the culture only because they were women. Demons so prevalent then, not unlike the demons which possess our culture and land these days.

Jesus, in this story, crosses ethnic, cultural, religious and gender boundaries. A woman dares to speak to him, and he *begins* to hear. It must have been a courageous crossing and a daring encounter—because for him it changed everything—his mind, heart, relationships and ministry.

Jesus’ first response to the woman is to reduce her humanity— “to put her in her place;” this was the response of his culture and community, not unlike what we hear ourselves today. If a person is seen as less than human, as deeply different than those in one’s own culture, nation, gender, or those named “other,” then their struggles, pain and victimization can easily be dismissed or ignored; or, as those disciples seem to be saying, “her problem is not ours.” Jesus’ first words are the sentiments of his day and still so prevalent in ours, words which seem to “justify” the prejudice, exclusion, blame,

and hatred of the time, then and now: "We must take care of ourselves first," or in the words Matthew places on Jesus' lips: "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.*" Words he speaks, not to the woman, as if she were not there, but to his disciples as they shout to him: "*Send her away...*" Words we hear, sadly, too often, these days in our own country and world, "*send them away,*" "*they are not like 'us.'*" "*They do not belong here.*"

But this "pagan" woman will not go away, and even more significant, she does not accept the role placed upon her by the cultural prejudices of her day. She will not be silent. She will speak, and she will not go away. She speaks with confidence, courage, and determination: "LORD, HELP ME." I am as deserving as anyone. My child, like every child, has a right to safety and peace; we have a right to justice, hospitality, compassion. I will not be silent. You cannot send me away. Words we still hear so often in our own time.

The prejudice of his culture and religion seems to haunt Jesus as he struggles with the accepted lies of the day: finally, he lets it out of his heart and mind. He calls her by the names so commonly given to those, in his day, perceived to be different. "*You are a dog.*" Shouting those words, for all to hear, this pagan woman, perceived as different and unworthy, shouts back with conviction, vision, and determination: You may not call me such names. I am worthy, you may not treat me as though I were less, you may not ignore the plight of my child, and you may not send me away. I will not go! Words, even today, we need to hear. Words we need to say. Words we are hearing. To the likely dismay of his disciples, *this "foreign" woman changes Jesus'*

heart, and indeed, his whole ministry from that day forward.

Her persistence and rejection of such name calling, and her unwillingness to go away, or to accept the prejudice and hatred of the day, just to please the "powers that be," or to "keep things the way they are," saved both herself and her child and indeed a whole people. This foreign, so-called pagan woman inspired Jesus, changed his heart, opened his vision to the gifts and needs of the many beyond those he first thought he was called to save and serve. His vision was expanded and the unconscious divine spirit within him opened his heart and mind!

So, it is *for* us: It is women and foreigners and those perceived as different, or "other," who will change our heart, our ways, our vision, and our mission. So it must be *with* us: Perhaps it is the "unconscious divine spirit" deep in our soul leading us to feel that our national heart needs to be changed, our common vision expanded beyond our own lives, gender, race, homes, and borders. Jesus crossed the ethnic, cultural, religious and gender boundaries of his day, and he was changed.

Heeding the voice of that divine spirit within, so too must we, you and I and all of us together, cross over with an open heart and mind and listen, listen to the voice of so many, "*calling after us,*" who cry with the painful determination of that Canaanite woman, longing to be freed from the demons which haunt us all. "LORD, HELP US."

Then, and only then, will we hear together those healing words: "*Great is your faith! Let it be done as you wish.*"

