

Homily 20th Sunday of OT Year A Is 56:1, 6-7; Matt 15:21-2

Pretty harsh words from Jesus today. Ironically, he doesn't sound all that Christ-like, does He? I'm going to use words I used 3 years ago because the explanation bears repeating. A couple of scholarly details will soften the edge a little, but the fact remains, this woman is anything but warmly welcomed, by the Lord.

The Greek words used for dogs here, imply a couple of things. First, they are house-dogs, or pets, and not some wild animals. Second, the word Jesus uses describes puppies. As we know, puppies are generally cute, cuddly and lovable, and don't bring to mind dirty, mangy mutts.

The Jewish practice of the day was that dogs, now matter how lovable, were not allowed inside the house to eat, sleep, or even just hang out. So, by including this pagan woman and her daughter among the dogs, Jesus didn't mean they were less human or lacked dignity, but that they didn't belong inside the house, of Israel.

And since he was sent first and foremost to the lost children of that house, it wouldn't be right for him to take his attention from them, in order to tend to 'the dogs', or the Gentiles.

Jesus simply affirms the paradigm of his time ... that the covenant between God and humanity was exclusive to Israel. And his disciples were like, "That's right Lord, you belong to us, you're our Messiah ... so tell this lady to get lost!"

Jesus states the paradigm ... but then, he breaks it ... by granting the woman's wish. The whole thing was likely intentional. As sure as he knew he would suffer and die, Jesus knew the paradigm of 'only Israel' would be blown apart.

He knew he would commission his disciples after the resurrection to "go out and preach to *all nations*." He knew Peter would be sent to the house of Cornelius to baptize an entire family of Gentiles all at once. He knew he himself would send St. Paul, a Jew, on a mission to the Gentiles, a.k.a. 'the dogs', to invite them into the house.

In fact, this development is foreshadowed even in the Old Testament. There's one example in our first reading, God's house "shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." So today, Jesus sets the stage for the expansion of the covenant, and gives the disciples an example, they can later recall to bolster their confidence, when doing so themselves.

I don't know if that makes you feel any better about the Canaanite woman's treatment, but I want to shift gears a bit now. // Some folks claim there are no coincidences in life. I'm not sure I believe that, but I do know that a hospital visit I had years ago, just days before today's gospel was proclaimed at Sunday Mass, was not coincidental.

I was on call for Saratoga Hospital from Thursday morning to Friday morning. A call came in, not from the hospital, but from another local parish. One of their parishioners, whose mother was deathly ill, called them for the sacrament of the sick. But one of their parish staff members referred the request to me.

I'm still not sure why ... perhaps that parish priest was unavailable, or perhaps he knew something I was about to find out. I stopped in the Pastoral Care office to confirm the patient's room number, but couldn't find her anywhere on the Catholic list. Rich, the fulltime chaplain, thought the name sounded familiar.

The strange thing was, he was pretty sure the pastor from the Methodist Church had been in to give her communion two days before. Hmm. So we pulled out the Methodist list. Lo and behold, there was the woman in question.

Now the obvious question for me. Why would this woman, clearly outside the "house of Catholicism," want to receive a sacrament from a Catholic priest? I suppose I could've dismissed it as a mistake, and had Rich call the Methodist minister back in, to tend to her needs, but I decided to check it out.

Normally, non-Catholics cannot receive the sacraments. However, in a life or death situation, or some other serious need, canon law allows non-Catholic Christians to receive the sacraments of the eucharist, anointing of the sick, and reconciliation under the following conditions. The non-Catholic must make the request – we can't go around inviting people.

The person's own minister must be unavailable, or there has to be no comparable rite in their tradition. The person must profess Catholic faith in the efficacy of the sacrament ... in other words, they have to believe in its reality and power, as an encounter with Christ, through which His grace is mediated.

OK so when I got to the room, the woman was in bed, and two daughters were beside her. They were surprised to see me, since I wasn't the daughter's parish priest. Somewhat awkwardly, I approached the mother and asked, "Now you're Methodist, right?" She nodded her head.

"But you'd like to receive the sacrament of the sick from me?" "Oh yes, Father, most definitely." "And you believe that Christ's healing grace will be afforded you in this celebration?" "Yes, I believe that." So I said, "Ok then. Let's rock n' roll!"

And I have to tell you, never had I witnessed someone more engaged, enthusiastic, and grateful in the celebration of this sacrament. She didn't know the rite, but she responded where she could, and added elements where she saw fit.

Instead of reflecting silently during the penitential section at the start, she openly confessed her sinfulness, in general terms, and expressed her faith in God's forgiveness.

She thanked me profusely afterwards, and told me she'd see me inside the pearly gates. I assured her I was in no hurry to get there, but asked if she would pray for me while she awaited my arrival. She assured me that she would.

I didn't think of it at the time, but I could've proclaimed from my heart, "O woman, great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish." And believe me ... she was healed from that hour. Imagine what the four of us would've missed, if I'd gotten too caught up, in an overly strict, and thereby unlawful adherence, to the Catholic paradigm.

Jesus reminds us today that we should be diligent in probing beneath the surface, to get to the heart of the matter. And when we look into a person's heart, we should be open to what it might offer us - and generous should it need something from us.

The Good Samaritan in Luke's gospel shows us there is no one, who is not our neighbor, and we're called to love them all, as we love ourselves. In doing so, things might not be done as we wish, but we will be fulfilling the wish of Jesus Christ ... and in the end, that is what it means ... to be Christian.