

One of the things we human beings are really good at is noticing differences between ourselves and other human beings. That is the first thing we do when encountering others for the first time. And we don't just notice the differences, but we use what we notice as the basis for how we will relate to them.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we have one of the most amazing stories in all of the New Testament as we see the humanity of Jesus on full display. It is the intense and troubling story of Jesus' encounter with one of those "others," a Canaanite woman. It is not just a nice little story about Jesus granting the request of a Gentile woman. Rather, at its deepest level, it is a surprising story about Jesus' sense of identity and mission being transformed. No stories about sweet Jesus meek and mild today, but a story demonstrating the divisions and alienation among God's people, then and now.

In this story we encounter the prickly theme of "choseness." Does God have favorites? Is there really a chosen nation, a chosen people? Are some of us in, and others out? If God is the Creator of all of us, how can this be? This is not an easy questions to confront or to answer. It is especially hard to answer when we know what terrible acts have been perpetrated by those who believe that God is on their side, and that includes both Christians and non-Christians.

In today's Gospel we hear this remarkable story of a Canaanite woman who comes to Jesus seeking healing for her daughter. "Canaanite" signified "pagan" to the Jews of Jesus' time. The area of Tyre and Sidon, on the Mediterranean coast northwest of the Jewish region was where those called pagans traditionally lived. The woman was obviously desperate. Jews had nothing to do with pagans. Besides that, women didn't ordinarily speak to strange men. Yes, she was desperate, all right, desperate to find some help for her daughter. That much is obvious.

It is also obvious that this woman knew something about Judaism, and also about Jesus. "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David." "Have mercy on me" is a cry of the afflicted often found in Scripture, especially in the Psalms. And in using the title "Son of David," she recognizes Jesus as the Messiah. No doubt his fame had spread as far as Tyre and Sidon, and she certainly could have heard about him and some of what he had said and done. This reminds us of the blind men sitting by the roadside in Chapter 20 crying. "Lord, have mercy on us, Son of David," Jesus touched their eyes, their sight was restored, and they followed him.

Those blind men, however, were Jews. The cry of the Canaanite woman was not so welcome. At first, Jesus didn't answer her. His disciples urged him to "send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." She was becoming increasingly annoying and preventing Jesus from doing his work. Even he tries to brush her off as he says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." But this woman is not easily discouraged. "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table," she answers. And then it sounds as if Jesus suddenly realizes that this *is* his work. In a change of heart Jesus says, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."

There are certain implications that could be drawn from the story of the Canaanite woman. You might ask, for instance, who are the Canaanites among us today? Who might a modern Christian want to see Jesus send away? Who would we modern Christians not welcome into our fellowship? And what message do we send, knowingly or unknowingly, to "those others," the Canaanites in our world?

A Jewish woman, no longer active in her own religion, has told of being repeatedly chased home after school by “Christian” children who threw rocks at her and yelled, “Christ-killer!” She is an agnostic now, she says. She doesn’t know if there is a God or not, but it doesn’t really matter to her. The actions of those so-called “Christians” took care of that.

A dark skinned family, in the wake of the disaster of September 11, suddenly found themselves shunned in the neighborhood where they had lived for years. “Nuke the ragheads!” signs appeared on their front lawn. It has always been like that. Children and adults were once brought from their native lands and enslaved, right here in “the land of the free and the home of the brave.” In the 19th century, “No Irish need apply” signs once discouraged recent Irish immigrants to the United States from seeking employment. Ireland itself is still split by sectarian, Roman Catholic-Protestant conflict. Loyal Japanese Americans were interned during World War II. German Americans were called “krautheads.” Many people automatically assume that many Italian Americans belong to the Mafia. People from the Ozarks are called “rednecks.” Jews and Palestinians remain enemies. We love labels and we consistently apply them to others. The list goes on and on, as it always has.

“They’ll know we are Christian by our love,” the words of the song say. Not by hate. Not by fear. Not by excluding anyone. We humans keep on drawing circles where only “me and mine” belong. The circles, some people think, will keep us safe. The circles will keep “them” out, whomever *they* may be. It is so easy and tempting for us humans to almost automatically see those who are different from ourselves as “other,” maybe even as problems or threats. We see it everywhere, and if we are brutally honest, we will see it in ourselves from time to time. Because of our discomfort with differences between ourselves and others, one of the first things we do when we encounter another person or group is to look for similarities, things in common, values or ideas or beliefs or priorities that we share. This is the nature and the power of sin, to divide and alienate God’s people from one another, and as we look around our world it is obvious that it is very good at its job.

But the funny thing is, God keeps drawing bigger circles. God’s circles are not meant to keep anyone out. God’s circles are meant to invite people in. And isn’t that a good thing for us all? If that weren’t the case, we might risk finding ourselves on the outside.

The woman hears his words, but she is the kind who is not deterred by being outside the circle of national and religious and cultural differences. She will not let them keep her from seeking help. Jesus uses language that separates those who think they are God’s chosen from those whom they consider outside God’s grace. The Israelites are the children inside the circle, and the outsiders are the dogs outside the circle. In our age and our culture this is heavy language. We don’t exactly know what it meant at that time and in that context, but we know it was not complimentary or caring and certainly not welcoming. We do know that Jesus invites the so-called “dogs” inside the circle.

Isaiah says, “And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to love the name of the Lord, these will I bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.” In Jesus’ encounter with a Gentile woman, we are reminded of the revelation that, because Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, he is called to reach out to the entire world. Whatever it was, something fell into place, and Jesus’ sense of identity and mission was enlarged, and he says, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was made well. Every person on earth is inside God’s circle. As Jesus physical body on earth today, will you and I invite them in no matter how different they might be? As is always the case in following him, this is easier said than done, but that is clearly his call to you and me.  
Amen