

**ECHOING GOD'S WORD
IN THE
CATHOLIC COMMUNITY**

**AUGUST 20, 2023
TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME**

SCRIPTURES:

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| Isaiah 56:1, 6-7 | God will welcome even those beyond Israel. |
| Romans 11:13-15, 29-32 | Separation from God for Israel is not permanent. |
| Matthew 15:21-28 | A bold Canaanite woman also receives mercy. |

SCRIPTURE BACKGROUND:

Matthew:

Matthew continues with Jesus instructing his disciples, all Jews, about their responsibility toward the people of other nations. Matthew wants to make sure that the leaders of the assembly in which he is a scribe or teacher will be formed with an open attitude toward the Gentiles also. Now that the Temple in Jerusalem is no more and that most Jews have been deported from Jerusalem (It will be the 20th century before the Jews once again are allowed to return there), Matthew is eager that his community of Christian-Jews would have an open attitude toward Gentiles, an attitude that is not always shared by other groups of Jews in the Diaspora. Those Jews who believe in Jesus cannot shut others out of their experience of believing in Jesus. If they have faith in Jesus, they need to be welcomed.

Matthew constructs his Gospel as an instruction to the leaders of his Christian-Jewish community with deliberate precision in this section, too. In the passage just before the one proclaimed today (Matthew 15:1-20), he has Jesus dealing with the laws of ritual purity as they pertain to food, declaring that it is what comes out of a person's mouth that makes that person 'clean' or 'unclean' and not what goes into it: food.

Now, he presents the scene where a Canaanite woman, unclean by definition since she is a Gentile, speaks words of faith in Jesus. Thus, Matthew illustrates his previous teaching from Jesus, by showing that goodness and holiness can come out of the mouth of even a Gentile. The woman is *bold*. She has to be bold in a society where persons are so radically separated from one another that one has no claim on a Jewish teacher if one is a Gentile.

The sharp exchange between Jesus and this woman is not meant to be offensive for either party. It represents the culture of the times. There can be no doubt, though, that Matthew is writing for a Jewish audience that knows that it has a prior claim on God's mercy because the promise of salvation was first addressed to the Jews. This woman has suffered long enough under the fact of exclusion from the hopes of her Jewish neighbors; she is going to shout until she is heard.

Gentiles were often called *dogs* by the Jews. There is nothing unusual about Jesus' response to her. Matthew has him speaking out of his tradition. But the woman reminds Jesus of the facts of her culture. Whereas in Jewish homes dogs were kept outside, in Gentile homes, dogs were household pets, kept *in the family*. In effect, she is saying that she is no stranger to the Jewish promises of salvation even though she is a Gentile because she has been *in the house* all along!

Jesus will go beyond the Jewish experience of his times and will respond favorably to a woman who demonstrates such faith. The message for the Christian community has to be quite clear: faith will allow one to overcome even the obstacle of traditional alienations and separations. No one can be denied access to the mercy of God if that one believes in Jesus Christ. If Jesus reached across the divisions of traditional separateness between Jews and Gentiles, while still affirming the priority of Jewish claims to God's mercy, what should we not do in the face of all our separations and divisions?

Isaiah:

Chapters 56-66 in the Book of Isaiah, it is generally agreed, were written after the Exile in Babylon when the people of Israel had rebuilt their Temple in Jerusalem after 515 BCE. After their exile, the people are much more open to other nations. They come to understand that God intends to call all peoples to himself. The people of Israel come to see themselves as the appointed instruments of God's mercy to all the nations of the earth. The Temple will also welcome the sacrifices of the other nations.

Romans:

Paul appeals to the Gentile Christians in Rome to be grateful to the Jews for the heritage that has come to the Gentiles now through the history of salvation which began among the Jews. Salvation is now available to all nations. Paul hopes that the Jews will become jealous of the Gentiles who are now entering God's kingdom and come to claim what had been promised to them originally. Note that Paul does not say that God has gone back on promises made to the Jews. The invitation is still there for them to accept. The Jewish nation has not been rejected by God.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Is it any wonder that parts of the Middle East are in such turmoil when vastly different ethnic and religious groups have historically been so hostile to one another? What do you think is the ideal solution to that problem and why?
2. Have you ever felt that you were being denied some of your rights in society because of your race, gender, ethnic origins, or religion? How did that feel? What was your response?
3. What do you think God will do to those persons who have never consciously made a decision for or against faith in Jesus Christ, simply because they do not know him? Suppose people refuse to become Catholic or Christians because they see so many scandals in the lives of those who are supposed to be following the teachings of Jesus. What will God do with those?

SUGGESTION FOR CHRISTIAN ACTION

Make an inventory of your attitudes and behaviors toward people who have a different background from yours. Try to make amends for any act of discrimination you may have been responsible for.

PRAYER

**Favor and bless us, Lord.
Let your face shine on us,
revealing your way to peoples'
salvation the world over.
Let nations sing your praise,
every nation on earth.**

From Psalm 67

CATHOLIC PASTORAL PRACTICES

Different ethnic groups of Catholics have enriched the fabric of society in America with the vast migrations that took place especially in the 19th century. People from poorer nations came to this land seeking a better future for themselves and for their children. Catholics came from Germany and from Ireland, from Italy and from Poland, from Quebec and from Mexico. When new territories were added, we acquired people of French and Spanish and Native American ancestry. Nowhere else on earth had so many different groups of people been absorbed into one nation and gathered into a Church that became so diverse in its cultural makeup.

Not without struggle and strife, though, did these elements become blended into one community of faith. At times, the *Americanizing* strategy of Irish American bishops seemed to threaten the German Catholics and the Polish Catholics and the French Catholics. Irish American priests were favored by Rome to become bishops because they were “born speaking English,” the national language of the United States. It was thought that they could provide more effective leadership for a Catholic community in a country which was mostly Protestant and English-speaking and unfriendly to ethnics from non-English-speaking countries.

Often, these diverse groups dug in their heels and held out against being absorbed into the “American culture,” which was perceived as being “Protestant and hostile.” Some Catholics thought that even other Catholics were a threat to them because they spoke a different language. French Canadians were warned by their pastors when they left Quebec to come to New England that if they *lost their language*, they would *surely lose their faith!* “*Perdre sa langue c'est perdre sa foi!*”

When I was ordained in 1958, there were two tracks for clergy promotions in the Diocese of Portland, the French and the Irish tracks. Priests who became pastors of parishes had to wait until there was an opening in a parish of their ethnic group. The ‘Irish’ priests (read: all those who were not French!) became pastors after having served as ‘assistants’ for approximately 15 years; ‘French’ priests became pastors after approximately 25 years (!) since there were more ‘French’ priests than there were ‘French’ parishes.

I went to a priest’s funeral in New Hampshire shortly after my ordination. I was told that I was standing on the wrong side of the grave at the burial; there was one side for the French clergy and another side for the Irish clergy! Is it any wonder that Catholics have found it hard to cooperate and collaborate with one another in those towns and cities with parishes from diverse ethnic heritages?