

Today's gospel is strange, don't you think? It is embarrassing too, since it seems to depict Jesus in an unflattering light. A desperate woman has come seeking help for her tormented daughter and Jesus' response is not what usually we hear from him. Usually he is the compassionate one, eager to help those who exhibit need and faith in him. But not in today's story. Is Jesus really as indifferent as he first seems? What's going on here?

The woman's faith has pushed her beyond her usual boundaries. She is a Canaanite and so has left her homeland to go out to Jesus. The conflicts between the Jews and the Canaanites were ancient and the woman had taken a risk when she entered Tyre and Sidon. She had the courage to leave the security of the familiar to venture into a place of tension in order to get help from Jesus.

The woman's faith is also shown in her persistence with Jesus. She is not easily dissuaded, even when Jesus refers to throwing the "children's" (the Jews) food to the "dogs" (the Gentiles). The woman insists she has some rights, even though she belongs to the "dogs" who eat the scraps from the table. She seems to be implying her belief that God will feed the "children" and the "dogs" -- both Gentiles and Jews.

Jesus has just been criticized by the Pharisees for his disciples not observing dietary and ritual cleansing rules. He called the religious leaders hypocrites who only pay lip service to God. In contrast, Jesus praised the Canaanite woman for having great faith. One of the very people the religious leaders would have despised for their religious and ethical practices receives the highest praise from Jesus. So, who are the truly pious and observant in Jesus' eyes? Those who see in him God's gracious desire to heal, forgive and welcome to the table. At that table, as at our eucharistic table today, God serves the best bread.

The disciples were all too ready to dismiss the woman. But as it turns out she exhibits more faith than even they have, for she sees that the God Jesus proclaims includes all people, even those believed unworthy by the pious and observant. God doesn't count class or ethnic standing as an entitlement to God's favour. All people of faith receive and find a receptive ear in God.

In recent years we have come to a renewed appreciation of Jesus' humanity through our reinvigorated studies of scripture. For example, Paul says that Christ emptied himself, "taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness, one like us in all things but sin (Phil. 2: 6-7). In Hebrews we are told Jesus was "tempted in every way that we are, yet never sinned". Again in Hebrews, Jesus "learned obedience from what he suffered." After his parents found the boy Jesus in the temple Luke tells us he returned with them to his home, "was obedient to them" and "progressed in wisdom and age and grace before God and humans". From this biblical perspective we observe that Jesus, like all humans, did not come into this world fully developed and all-knowing, but like us he grew, "in wisdom and age and grace before God and humans." From this perspective we might say that when Jesus encountered the woman and heard her request, he was expressing

his first intention: to preach his message to “the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But when he saw the woman’s strong faith in him, especially after just being rejected by those who should have known better, the religious leaders, he then understood his mission in a new way.

The woman was a clear sign to Jesus that God’s salvation was meant for all people and all nations – not just for the Jews. Today’s encounter with the Canaanite woman shows a growth in Jesus’ human consciousness and his human understanding of God’s plan for humanity. How does this change take place? By the woman’s persistence and unwillingness to accept a narrow and restrictive view of God. She realized birth and religious origins cannot hold back the outpouring of God’s love on all people. If we make God too small and puny in love we have not heard the gospel message.

The early church, and even our present one, would struggle with the message being affirmed in today’s gospel. Even after the resurrection some in the church thought Jesus’ message should be restricted to Israel, even though Matthew’s gospel ends with the risen Jesus’ mandate to go into the whole world and preach the gospel.

God has included us in Jesus’ message of forgiveness and reconciliation. We didn’t do anything to earn that inclusion, it was handed over to us through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and we have accepted the invitation to the table where the food of God’s reign is given us. Gathered at this table we hear the risen Jesus’ mandate to proclaim the good news to all.

Are there any people or groups who are automatically included in our circle of friends and church members? Are any overlooked or ignored? Whom do we consider not worth our time? In other words, who are the Canaanites in our lives who are ignored or quickly brushed aside? Jesus heard the woman’s voice and accepted her. Am I also open to the voices who call out to me for help daily? We are trying to respond to the gospel we have received by doing to others what has been done for us. Just as our God has listened and responded to us, so we offer a willing ear and respond to those who express their needs to us. May each of us listen and grow in the ways of the Lord.