

Homily of Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time Year A, 2020

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67:2-8; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matthew 15:21-28

The first reading took place when the Israelites had returned from the Babylonian captivity, and had rebuilt the temple of Jerusalem. Through Prophet Isaiah, God declared to the Israelites, "Foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, ministering to him, loving the name of the Lord, and becoming his servants; all who keep the Sabbath free from profanation; and hold fast to my covenant; them I will bring to my holy mountain and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples." This declaration brought to the attention of the Israelites that the sacrifices and offerings of non-Israelites who accepted Yahweh as their God and who kept his laws and covenants were acceptable to God; and they could worship in the temple like the Israelites. By this declaration, God communicated to the Israelites the universality of salvation and his rejection of the discrimination against the Gentiles.

In the second reading, St. Paul, although a Jew, was an apostle to the Gentiles. In Galatians 3:28, St. Paul writes, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." Salvation is not a prerogative to any special group of people, but for all peoples.

In the Gospel, the Canaanite woman did not mind the enmity between the Canaanites and the Jews, and how the Jews disparaged the Canaanites. She made her way to see Jesus to present her case. Her daughter was tormented by a demon. Jesus did not say a word when the woman prayed to him. Although Jesus was testing the faith of the woman, but more importantly, Jesus wanted the event to be a teaching moment for his disciples and the Jews. The disciples reacted, "Send her away, for she is calling after us." Jesus responded by repeating two Jewish derogatory sayings against the Gentiles. First: "I was sent only for the lost sheep of the house of Israel." By this statement, Jesus reechoed the Jewish age old belief that the Messiah was going to come to save only the Jews. Jesus' statement did not put the woman off. She persisted and "did homage to Jesus, saying, 'Lord, help me.'" Second derogatory statement: "It is not right to take the food for children and throw it to the dogs." The Jews also regarded the Gentiles as 'dogs' who live unclean lives, and do not know the law or keep the law. Again, the woman stood her ground and pleaded with the touching remark, "Please, Lord, for even dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their master." Jesus, then, exclaimed, "O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." "And the woman's daughter was healed from that hour.

Importantly, the Gospel's episode maintains the theme in the first reading and second reading, that God is the creator and father of all, and that Jesus came to bring salvation to save the whole world. Jesus came to break down dividing walls of enmity between races (Ephesians 2:14).

The Canaanite woman has a few lessons to teach us. The first is her unwavering faith in Jesus, although she was non-Jew. She believed Jesus would heal her daughter. Nothing could discourage her. The second is she persisted in her prayer. She did not stop until her prayer was granted. The third is that she was not deterred by what people thought or said about her. She remained focused on her goal. The fourth is that she displayed great humility.

The disciples of Jesus said to him, "Send her away, for she is calling out after us." We hear this same kind of hate cry against fellow human beings in our families, establishments, institutions, organizations, communities, religious bodies, countries, and the entire fabric of our society: "Send them away, they don't look like us." "Send them away, they don't speak like us." "Send them away, their religion is different." "Send them away, they are taking our jobs." "Send them away, they don't belong to our party." "Send them away, they will overtake us." "Send them away, they don't reason like us." "Send them away, they don't agree with us." "Send them away, they don't support us." This kind of hate is part of the cause of racism, segregation, tribalism, ethnicity, inequality, enslavement, discrimination, marginalization, preferentialism, superiority, favoritism, partialism, gangsterism, exclusionism, and persecution. Sadly, in political, social, economic, and religious history, this kind of hate has led to expulsions, xenophobia, killings, ethnic cleansings, genocides, pogroms, and massacres. We pray for the change of heart of the perpetrators of these evils.

Is there someone calling after us for help whom we have neglected or dismissed? Is there someone we disrespect or disdain because he or she is different, or because he or she does not belong? Is there someone we want to be sent away, or be displaced because we are envious, or jealous, or we just don't like the person? As individuals, let us take the message of today to heart, to our homes and to our relationships and interactions, and treat everyone with love, respect, and dignity. Indeed, we are invited to a change of heart.

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