

[Readings: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7; Psalm 67; Romans 11:13-15, 29-32; Matt 15:21-28]

How ridiculous prejudice is, yet how commonplace. From the earliest days that men and women have walked the earth, we have had this disturbing tendency to build walls, to separate people one from another. Whether barriers of race, nationality, religion or economic status, all of us can claim a share of guilt for maintaining those walls: the physical and social walls that separate US from THEM. In our readings, we hear of people who scale those walls to teach us all a lesson.

In the First Reading, we hear about the plight of foreigners and eunuchs who are afraid that they will be shunned and barred from the religious services of the Jews. They need not worry. Foreigners are welcomed warmly to the point of being deemed worthy of ministering to God and becoming God's servants. They are to be considered full participants in God's covenant relationship. No one is to be excluded who follows the spirit of God.

St. Paul extends this open welcome to all the non-Jews whom he has visited and to whom he has preached and served. Many of his fellow Jews refuse to believe in Jesus Christ and accept His salvation. So Paul turns to all the other nations of the known world and makes no fewer than three "missionary journeys" to all the known parts of the Western and Middle Eastern world. If the Jews do not listen, maybe other people will. Are WE listening?

This message reaches its high point in our Gospel. You think YOU'VE had a bad week? Look at Jesus. After John the Baptist is killed, Jesus withdraws, only to find more people needing nourishment, and He feeds more than five thousand! Crossing the lake, He calms the stormy seas and calls Peter to follow in faith. He heals many who are sick in Gennesaret before encountering yet another argument with some scribes and Pharisees over the interpretation of the Jewish law. He thinks he can get away with his apostles to the west coast cities of Tyre and Sidon, hoping to get a little rest. It is here that the Canaanite woman forces her way into the room and interrupts his fellowship.

The implied details of this meeting are lost on us.

Way back in the Book of Genesis, Noah curses the Canaanites as the “lowest of slaves.” The entire Book of Joshua tells the bloody story of Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan, now called Iraq. The fighting continues between Israelis and Palestinians to this day. I sometimes question God’s decision to give a land already occupied by the Canaanites to the Jewish people through violent acts of war and bloodshed. I need to brush up on my Ancient Near East history!

The woman calls Jesus “Lord, Son of David.” This woman – this Canaanite woman – is the first woman in the Gospel of Matthew to publicly identify Jesus as who He is! Then Jesus continues the conversation. Unheard of for a Jewish rabbi to speak publicly with a woman who was not his wife! In doing so, Jesus makes the woman his religious, cultural and earthly equal. Her last remark, “Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table,” would merit her a perfect score of 10 in the Jewish/Christian Religious Olympics! She wins the gold medal for her “great faith!”

Who are the “Canaanite women” in our country and society today? What group of people make us cringe just by hearing the name of their group? The message of our readings today stretch us out of our comfort zones and our convenient boxes. Dear friends, we are the descendants of that Canaanite woman. We are the little puppies eating the scraps of food off the table of the sons and daughters of Israel. So, let us assume the posture of that Canaanite woman. Let us give thanks to Jesus, who is the son of David and Our Lord. And let us be grateful that the scraps from the table of Israel have been so generously bestowed to us.

When have YOU been welcomed, despite appearing to be an outsider, or feeling not deserving of love or forgiveness? How do we make ourselves a more welcoming community, a more welcoming household, a more welcoming family, a true “house of prayer?” How great is OUR faith? There are “the lowest of slaves” knocking on our church doors whose faith may be as great as the Canaanite woman’s is. Will we let them in as Jesus did? AMEN!