

**20th Sunday in ordinary Time
August 17, 2008**

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

Sir Isaac Newton once defined tact as the art of making a point without making an enemy. We have a marvelous illustration of tact in today's fascinating gospel story.

Jesus is in Gentile territory, near Tyre and Sidon, foreign lands to the Jews. And a Gentile woman, a Canaanite from that region, comes out and starts shouting at Jesus and the disciples. She ignores all the cultural taboos about Gentile women speaking with Jewish males. Moreover she is quite assertive and even noisy as she approaches. She is also insightful. She knows who Jesus is (this is typical of Matthew's gospel; remember the Magi). She addresses him with both his titles in Matthew's gospel: "Lord and Son of David." The first indicates that he is intimately connected to God; he is universal and belongs to everyone therefore. The second indicates that he is the Jewish Messiah, with a particular lineage and distinctive traditions.

(In fact, Matthew uses one of his favorite revelatory words when he introduces this woman; he says "Behold." Whenever Matthew says "Behold" an angel usually shows up soon afterwards. This is a sign of a clear manifestation or revelation of God—or rather, she is.)

She is no dummy. She sets Jesus up from the very beginning of the story. Yes, he is particular; he is the Jewish Messiah, but he is also universal; he must be for all. And besides, she does not want anything for herself; she just wants mercy to flow through her to her daughter beset by a demon. She will not be put off. As theologian John Shea phrases it: she is first noisy and assertive, then becomes pleading and compliant, and finally exhibits just how clever and confrontative she can become. She practically forces Jesus to recognize who he really is (notice the second time she addresses him she drops the title Son of David and just reminds him that he is, indeed, Lord). He seems to change his mind, offers healing, and praises her great faith.

She knows that if this Jewish Messiah can help, he will. And little things like ethnic diversity and hatred will not stand in his way. She remains steadfast, single-minded, and persistent. In this moment, she seems to know Jesus better than he knows himself. Or, at least, the self he is not thinking about at the moment, the one who belongs to everyone, not just the Jews.

But she has made her point. She has not made an enemy. And she has become the conduit of mercy for her daughter who is immediately healed. A great story. And a *painful* lesson for us all. Yes, painful—because the kingdom of God holds us *all*, and there is always someone, it seems, whom I want to

exclude, need to exclude.

But there is no inside and outside the Kingdom. There is no Gentile or Jew. There is no room to forget that this is at the heart of Jesus' life and message. If we do forget, the story suggests, we will all have to listen to some other nagging foreign woman reminding us of the dogs under the banquet table again!

This is a painful lesson. One that Isaiah had to proclaim over and over again to his people: my house shall be a house of prayer for *all* peoples." And St. Paul goes so far as to identify himself in today's reading as "the apostle to the Gentiles." The foreigners cannot be kept out. Theirs, too, is the Kingdom of God. That hurts. Mostly because *I'm* supposed to be special; *we're* supposed to be special. If you don't feel the hurt, you are just not looking at yourself carefully enough.

I'm not here to give you a lecture on who today's outcasts are. I don't really know myself. And they are certain to be different for many different people in this church. For some, they still may be of a different color; others can be color-blind, but not like the ethnic diversity today's church brings, or different religions and spiritualities. For some the foreigners will be gay and lesbian people; for others Muslims or atheists. The list could go on with

almost infinite variety. But if Rene Girard and many other contemporary anthropologists and theologians are right, everyone has “a foreigner” of whom they are frightened and whom they try to exclude. Frequently we just scapegoat them and then try to murder them—figuratively or, sadly, sometimes literally.

And, worse yet, when I think I do know some days who does really frighten me, that does not mean I actually change my attitude toward them. I’m afraid I’m a bit like St. Paul here: I pretty consistently don’t do the things I know are right, and do things I know are wrong (Romans 7:15); I still want to exclude people.

The gospel today is a lovely, if somewhat perplexing, story, bolstered by two other supportive and strong readings from Paul and Isaiah, all coming to the same rather painful conclusion. You and I are the ones clearly invited to change ourselves. Maybe God is using Sir Isaac Newton’s definition with us and being tactful today: Matthew’s story does make a sharp point—without leaving room for any enemies whatsoever. Using today’s disquieting image, perhaps we are all invited to ask ourselves again a potentially embarrassing question: exactly who and where are the hungry dogs barking under our own banquet tables? And listen carefully to Jesus’ response.