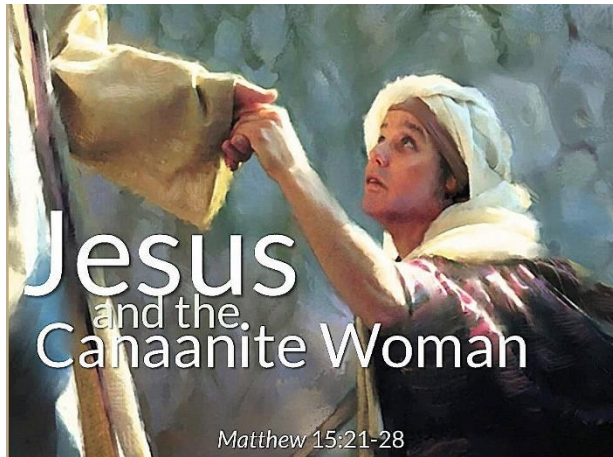


Homily - August 19th and 20th, 2023
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time



As you may know, the little slice of the Scriptures on any given Sunday is only that, a slice. The mistake we often make in reading these Bible stories, or just in life in general, is to think we have the whole pie when we only have a slice of the pie. Even Jesus makes the mistake with this Canaanite women. She has to remind him that initially he only has a piece of the puzzle and not the whole

puzzle. Situating a story into the context of the larger story is so important.

We are told this woman is a Canaanite woman. Being a Canaanite and being a woman are both important for the context of this story. Way back, perhaps 2,000 years before the birth of Christ, the land that God promised Abraham and his descendants (the "Promised Land") was already occupied by a pagan tribe called the Canaanites. 500 years later, around 1,500 B.C., Moses leads the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt to the edge of the Promised Land, but it is Joshua, who finally defeats the Canaanites and kicks them out of Canaan. Now, God's Chosen People can finally make their home where God intended them to. (By the way, the displaced Canaanites come to New Brunswick and settled along the Canaan River). The Canaanites are defeated and from that time on, around 1500 B.C., no longer exist as a people except for a few small pockets here and there. Jesus meets up with a Canaanite woman living in one such pocket, in the district of Tyre and Sidon.

Jesus had great respect for the prophets who came before him; they truly were messengers from God and many of them were put to death promoting belief in the one true God. The Jews, believing in the one true God couldn't have been more different than the pagan Canaanites who believed in their many gods. One such god was called Baal, the fertility god. The Canaanite religious rituals, their liturgy you might say, was lewd, immoral, and always included "sacred" prostitutes, male and female prostitutes doing some "dirty" dancing during liturgy. (If you're interested in starting up a ministry of "sacred" prostitutes, I'll have a sign-up sheet after Mass).

One of Israel's Jewish kings married a Canaanite woman named Jezebel (with a fiancée named Jezebel, you know this is going to be a disaster). Jezebel is a tyrant

who corrupted her husband and the nation of Israel by promoting pagan worship. (She was probably one of these liturgical pole dancers herself). The prophet Elijah challenges Jezebel and proves her pagan gods were no match for the one true God. The wicked queen Jezebel demands Elijah's head. Elijah escapes the murderous old hag and flees the country for his life. He hides in a cave and asks for God's comfort and guidance. He doesn't find God in the violent wind, or in the earthquake, or in the fire. He finds God in the sound of sheer silence. That was a last Sunday's first reading if you remember.

Knowing the prophets gave their lives to promote belief in the one true God, and knowing Canaanite pagan beliefs flew in the face of his own Jewish faith, I can see why Jesus is cold and dismissive of this Canaanite woman.

One of the reasons I like her is that there is no ego-investment in her. She is not asking a favor for herself but for her daughter who is tormented by a demon. Like a good parent, she would rather suffer than see her child suffer. Her only goal is her daughter's wellbeing. Jesus dismisses her and even calls her a dog. In the interest of preserving Jesus' divinity, and in interest of defending Jesus as the sinless one, we want to either say, "Jesus never said or did that" or we want to apologize for Jesus. We don't have to do that. We don't have to apologize for Jesus. Never apologize for someone who makes mistakes, learns from them, and becomes a better person because of it. This woman is not only in the right but she is also determined, passionate, crafty, and faith filled.

She is not a Jew, yet she initially addresses Jesus by his Jewish title. She says, "**Have mercy on my, Lord, Son of David.**" She calls him "Lord," and more importantly, "Son of David." To this, Jesus dismissed her by saying, "I came for my own people...I came for the lost sheep of the house of Israel...you do not belong to the house of Israel, therefore you should take a number, get in line, and if I have time, I'll get to you." She persists and this time pleads to Jesus not as "Son of David," but as "Lord."

"Lord, help me" she says. And then to make things worse, Jesus says, **"It's not fair to take the children's food** (food meant for Chosen People, the Jews), **and throw it to the dogs** (the Canaanites)."

She doesn't budge and her comeback is brilliant. She addresses him now for the third time, again with "Lord" and not "Son of David." She says, **"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."** Now Jesus gets it. She has opened his mind to a reality that he temporarily forgot. Under the Jewish title of "Son of David" Jesus seemingly can't help this non-Jewish woman. She reminds

him, by calling him “Lord” that he came not for the Jews only, but for the whole world. She reminds Jesus that he is Lord of the entire world.

His mistake is not so much that he dismisses her and even calls her a dog. His real mistake is forgetfulness. She reminds him about his true identity. In gratitude for this correction, he says, **“Woman, great is your faith”** and grants her wish.

Faith, and not anything else, is the thing Jesus praises the most when he finds it in people. Wherever Jesus finds people on a faith journey, wherever he finds people interested in shaping their lives around what is true, he praises it. Interestingly, almost all his praise is for non-Jews, the outsiders, and almost all his criticism is directed at the people in the comfortable center, those who go to Temple and synagogue regularly and who never break the rules. He never praises, but always critiques, the Pharisees, the so-called guardians of the faith.

I like both this woman and Jesus. Jesus gets corrected and takes no offense in it. He learns from it, he grows from it, and he is a little wiser because of this woman. There is no imperial ego working in either Jesus or in the Canaanite woman.

As a Roman Catholic priest I have made, and continue to make, the mistake of seeing my life and my ministry too closely connected to my own denomination. When I do that, I’m only good for the Roman Catholics and no good to anyone else. I need a Canaanite in my life to remind me of two truths: firstly, that I have something to offer to those outside the circle of the Roman Catholic Church, and, secondly, the outsiders have something to offer me as well. If I am to model my life on Jesus who is the Lord of all, my primary goal is to seek the truth and to celebrate it wherever I find it regardless of whether people go to church or never consider it.

This Canaanite woman is willing to reach out beyond her pagan faith to the one true Lord. All she wants is to believe in a God who is large enough to reach back and embrace her, and Jesus does. Responding to human needs must always come before religious identity.

Fr. Phil