

Homily for August 14, 2011

As many of you know I grew up in Mississippi. My great-great-great grandparents were among my family members who settled the land that was my home until I went to college. In Mississippi at that time it was illegal for black Americans and white Americans to attend the same public schools, and black people were excluded from public life, for instance, not allowed to drink from public water fountains, go to public restrooms, swim in public pools; they were barred from hotels and motels, and allowed to eat only in segregated restaurants. They were barred from most white churches. In 1954 the Supreme Court declared that separation of blacks and whites in public schools was unconstitutional. I was in college at the time, and segregation was a hot topic in the dormitories and the classrooms. I was still in Mississippi when James Meredith, a black man, enrolled at the University of Mississippi, and violence erupted. Not until I went back to graduate school in 1964, this time in Texas, did my wife Ruth tell me she had lived in fear that I would be killed because of my opposition to racism.

I'm sure you must be wondering what my story has to do with the readings for today. Simply this: I know what it is like to grow up in a society in which people are sharply divided as them and us, and I believe that the Gospel reading for today is very easy to misunderstand. The Gospel may seem strange or even offensive to us because of the language it uses. In the United States some of us, though obviously not all, tend to be very sensitive about derogatory names. Such sensitivity was not a part of any culture during the time when Jesus lived on the earth as a man. For some of us at least, an understanding of the history and customs in the time of Jesus is helpful as we read today's Gospel.

In those days, Greeks called those who were not Greeks "barbarians"; Romans called those who were not Romans "plebeians"; and Jews called those who were not Jews "goyim" if they spoke Hebrew or, "ethne" in Greek, in English "gentile." These terms in themselves were derogatory, but in common usage people used even more derogatory terms. Jews, for instance, used the term "dog" to refer to gentiles. Jesus, of course, was a Jew. Moreover, the woman who is calling out to Jesus is referred to, not just as a Gentile, but as a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were people who were regarded as irredeemably evil. Also no woman would speak to a strange man unless she was a prostitute. Here is a woman whom no Jew would have any dealings with under any circumstances.

Yet in today's gospel this woman is calling out to Jesus, asking him to heal her daughter. At first he ignores the woman. His disciples, annoyed by her persistence, tell him to send her away. The woman continues to appeal to Jesus. He speaks first to his disciples, saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." You may recall that earlier when Jesus sent out the twelve on a mission, he had said to them, "Do not go into pagan territory or enter a Samaritan town. Go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5b-6), and when Paul went out on his mission trips, he always went first to the Jews of the area. With some exceptions, of course, only Jewish people had any concept of a Jewish messiah. Many of you may remember, however, the story of the Roman centurion who, early in Jesus' ministry, asked Jesus to heal his servant. When Jesus was about to come to heal the servant, the centurion said, "Lord, I am not worthy to have you enter under my roof; only say the word and my servant will be healed" (Matthew 8:8). Jesus response? "Amen, I say to you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I say to you, many will come from the east and the west, and will recline with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at the banquet in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 8:10b-11).

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What did this woman know about a Jewish messiah or about Jesus himself? She was a Gentile living in a land, foreign to the Jews, but she addressed him saying, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David" (vs. 22). Matthew is telling us that she knew something of the promise of God to send a messiah, for "Son of David" is a Messianic term. Some scholars also believe that she is calling to him as God, for she is using the word "Lord," the word that Jews used to call upon God. No further information is given to us. This foreign woman continues to call out to Jesus: "Lord, help me!" When Jesus answers her, even though his words may sound harsh to us, I suggest that Jesus is speaking gently to her, for he uses the diminutive, "little dogs" or "puppies" as he says, "It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the [puppies]." If the woman is offended, she certainly does not show that she is. Instead, she persists, "Please, Lord, for even the [puppies] eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Now as Jesus responds to her, we are reminded of his statement to the centurion. To her he says, "O woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed from that hour."

This episode in the Gospel tells us that the care of our Lord Jesus extends beyond the boundaries of race and nation to the hearts of all. As we read in Paul's letter to the Ephesians:

Therefore, remember that at one time you, Gentiles in the flesh, . . . were at that time without Christ, alienated from the community of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have become near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, he who made both one and broke down the dividing wall of enmity . . . that he might create in himself one new person in place of two, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile both with God, in one body . . .
(Ephesians 2:11-16a).

Several years ago my African American friend and colleague, Clayton Holloway said to me, "John, I'm going back to South Carolina. In Iowa it is not politically correct to be prejudiced, so I take people at face value, and I keep getting myself into embarrassing situations. In South Carolina if a person does not speak to me, I don't speak to him. If he greets me, I greet him. There I know where people are coming from." Jesus now calls us to recognize the walls he has broken down, the walls that prejudice and hostility build up once again. May we know within our minds and hearts the love and care that our Lord extends to all, no matter the color of their skin or their legal status or their religion, and may we come to share the faith of the Canaanite woman and the Roman centurion so that we too may be healed and become the faithful servants of our God.