

Earlier this summer I read Jesuit spiritual writer Father James Martin’s latest book, **Building A Bridge: How the Catholic Church and the LGBT Community can enter into a Relationship of Respect, Compassion, and Sensitivity.** Fr. Martin’s book is a response prompted by the murder of 49 gay and lesbian people in June, 2016 at the **Pulse Nightclub** in Orlando, Florida.

Father Martin’s book as well as my own personal prayer and reflection on how I as a priest, and we, as a parish community can relate to our LGBT brothers and sisters came to mind as I pondered today’s Scriptures, especially the encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman in the Gospel. That incident, I believe, offers a parallel to the relationship often experienced between members of the Church and the LGBT community, challenges stereotypes, and offers an invitation to a relationship of mutual respect, compassion and sensitivity as modeled by Jesus, stated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and spoken about by Fr. Martin in his book.

St. Matthew tells us that Jesus and the disciples were walking into the territory of Tyre and Sidon—an area filled with Gentiles, people not like them, people who have a different history, different form of worship, different lifestyle, not unlike LGBT individuals and their community. Unexpectedly, a Canaanite woman (she’d have two strikes against her—being a woman and a Canaanite) dares to call out to Jesus (a man and a Jew) in public. The disciples are wary. A Canaanite?! Those people?! Oh no, no, **we** are not to be associating with Canaanites. **They’re** intrinsically disordered. **We** are the chosen people. **We** are the pure, the clean. **We** can’t have “those people” in our company. No sir. No way. **They’re** bad. **They’ve** always been bad. **They’re** unclean. Attitudes not unlike some in the Church hold or give to a LGBT person or their community.

The woman cries out to Jesus—“Help me!” Jesus’ initial brusque response dismissing the woman appears, well, “un-Jesus.” Some Scripture scholars see it as an illustration of how Jesus in his human nature was enlightened by the Holy Spirit to step out of his personal and cultural religious “comfort zone” and realize that his ministry was not to be narrowly focused only on the people of Israel, but that he was called and sent by his

Father to a salvific mission for **all people**; Jew and Gentile. Others speculate that Jesus was publicly revealing the unexpressed attitudes held by the disciples in order to confront their narrowness of vision and hardness of heart. Can't you just imagine the looks on the disciples' faces when the woman proceeds to talk back to Jesus. Their mouths must have gaped and their eyes bugged out. "What did she just say to him? Did she just talk back to **our Lord**? We can't read Jesus' mind in this story. We'll probably never know why he acted the way he did. We do know that he was moved by the Canaanite woman's plea, her passion, persistence and especially, her faith. For that, Jesus grants her the mercy she sought. He heals her daughter and lifts her up as a model of faith.

How many of our LGBT brothers and sisters, not as an abstract individual or group "out there" but as a family member, classmate, fellow employee, member of our parish, like the Canaanite woman, are calling out to us on the road of life, pleading for recognition, respect, compassion and sensitivity hoping to encounter in us the face and mercy of Jesus? Like the disciples, do I ever sidestep an LGBT person choosing to hide behind my prejudices, even religious ones? For example, what words do I use when speaking about LGBT persons? Are they words of respect or ones that demean them as persons? Do I tell, or laugh at, jokes about them? Do I confront those who do? Am I outraged when I hear of acts of violence directed at LGBT persons or their community? Do I ever get a little (or more than a little) defensive when someone calls me to conversion?

Part of our Christian vocation through Baptism is to listen for people calling out in pain or torment—to be attuned to their needs, to meet them where they are at, to let them speak to us on their own terms, to be what we have been made—the body of Christ. If you are an LGBT person here today; **welcome**. You are part of God's family; **our brother, our sister**. We need you! We need the gifts you bring us. We need to journey together to greater understanding and respect. Together, we become, as Isaiah reminds us, God's "house of prayer" for all peoples.

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