

20th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Cliff Fitzmorris

In the passages just before our Gospel reading, Jesus had been in Jerusalem arguing theology with the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites and told them that they only gave God lip service and were worried more about their own rules than truly following God.

So after this big fight, Jesus leaves Jerusalem for a while and heads off way up north, far away from Jerusalem, out of Israel even, up near what is now Lebanon. He's out of the Holy Land, he's no longer surrounded by the Israelites, the Chosen Ones, the people that he was sent to redeem. He's in the land of the Gentiles.

And who comes up to him but the worst kind of Gentile, a Canaanite. They don't worship our God, they don't follow the Jewish customs, they would never visit the temple. The Jews thought that Canaanites are terrible people. She's the last person who should be interested in the King of the Jews, in the Messiah, but here she comes, right up to Jesus.

It turns out that her daughter is possessed with a demon. For us, that's a little bit hard to relate to because although sometimes people joke about their kids being little demons, we don't see much demon possession around. But we are really familiar with other demons like serious illness and drug addiction. We do know what it's like to be so worried about your kid that you're physically sick and that you'd do anything to make them well and whole again. That's the place she's in. So we know how this Canaanite woman feels, and it makes sense why she's desperate enough to approach not only a Jew, but a famous rabbi and healer.

The disciples don't want to mess with her, she's clearly trouble. They just want her and her possessed daughter to go away. I wonder where they would go? Where else should they go? But the disciples are caught up in the business of the day and they need her to move on.

Jesus does what Jesus always does and that's engage her as a person. When he says that it's not right to give the food meant for the children to the dogs, he's not trying to insult her or get rid of her, he's asking her why she thinks it would be OK for him to go around healing people who aren't even in his own country, his own people.

In her humility, she agrees that she doesn't deserve it, but she needs it. She's asking for mercy even though she knows she's not from the holy land, she's not one of the chosen people. Of course, Jesus has just gotten back from the center of the holy land where he and the chosen ones have just had a giant shouting match at each other and now he's confronted with this woman who has shown through her actions and her humility that she truly believes he can cast out demons, that he is the Son of God. And so Jesus heals her daughter.

We know what it is like to feel excluded like this Canaanite woman. We know what it is like to not be one of the chosen people. Sometimes at work or at school, we do not fit in. Even at

church, sometimes we don't fit in. The good news in today's gospel is that there are no boundaries to God's mercy and you are in fact one of Jesus's chosen people no matter what you've done in the past and no matter where you're from. You could be from Canaan and God loves you. You could even be from Texas and God still loves you!

There's another message in this Gospel and it's a challenge for us as a Church, as a parish, and us individually. Sometimes the people who are ready to come to Christ are the people who we think are pagans, or unworthy. They're not from the chosen land, they don't know our customs, people we might think much about. They don't know our Catholic vocabulary, they don't have our prayers memorized, they don't know much about theology. But they have come to understand that they need God, they need Jesus. We have to be open, we have to be listening and looking for those people in our lives, at our work, in our school, at the soccer game and in the grocery store who have serious needs like this Canaanite woman, who have realized that the secular beliefs of our modern world have run out of gas in the face of serious trouble. They probably aren't going to have possessed kids, but they've got serious trouble. They might be the last person we'd ever expect to become religious. The challenge to us is to be prepared, be ready, so that when we bump into the Canaanite woman, the person who is ready to come to Jesus, we're ready to bring them to Him. We need to encounter that person as a person, like Jesus would, without all the labels. We can teach them to pray, we can tell them about how Jesus makes a difference in our lives, we can bring them to Mass and tell them it's OK if all they can do is follow along at first. This is how the love of Christ spreads, one person at a time, one relationship at a time, listening and walking with them through the trouble towards the hope and love and salvation that is Jesus Christ.