

TWENTIETH SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME (8/16-17/2008)

Isaiah 56/1-7, Psalm 67, Romans 11/13-15, 29-32, Matthew 15/21-28

Frequently enough, Jesus surprises us by his conduct or by what he says.

In fact, “surprise” is hardly the word to describe our reaction to today’s Gospel story.

While we may understand his purpose in keeping the Canaanite woman at arm’s length, the way that Jesus behaves startles us.

She is a Gentile, perhaps a descendant of the original Philistines who inhabited the coast region in Palestine.

The Philistines had been mortal enemies of the Jews when Israel had taken over the land of “milk and honey” after the destruction of Jericho and some 1200 years before Jesus.

As a presence, they didn’t go away even when the Jewish tribes were in the ascendancy.

Just as this woman doesn’t go away.

Anyway, this Canaanite woman breaks in on Jesus when he is taking a few days off alongside the Mediterranean, enjoying a little R and R, you might say.

Is he a little impatient at the interruption?

If so, we can understand that; no one likes to be reminded of work at the seaside.

The woman comes to Jesus, whose reputation has preceded him, asking him to cast the demon out of her daughter.

We are not always certain what is meant when the Gospel says a demon was at work.

Perhaps the child was suffering from mental illness of some kind or other.

No matter, the child needs help; the mother seeks it wherever she can.

At her plea, Jesus is silent – says nothing to the woman, ignores her completely.

This is so unlike the usually attentive and kind Galilean rabbi.

The lady, however, is nothing if not persistent and keeps calling for his attention.

Even Jesus’ followers grow agitated and beg Jesus to dismiss the troubled woman.

Jesus’ response is curt and to the point: *“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel.”*

His reason for rejecting the woman has to do with the goal of his mission.

While at the end of Matthew’s Gospel (28/19), Jesus sends his disciples out to *“all the nations”*, early

on he sees his work as among the Israelites only.

Still, Jesus seems stiff and unbending, but the woman will not be distracted by such a blunt theological statement.

She has a child to worry about – and Jesus has no children of his own!

So she drops to her knees and begs him to act, and, again, his response is off-putting: “*It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.*” Take that, lady.

Undaunted, she replies: “*...even the dogs eat the scraps from the table of their masters.*”

Her quick and clever response obviously moves Jesus, and he declares her faith to be strong and her child to be cured.

Challenged by this concerned mother, is this the moment when Jesus begins to look beyond Israel to the whole world? Is she the one who motivates Jesus to change his mind?

Is she the reason why you and I have been invited to embrace the Good News?

Anonymous she may have been, but she was also a major agent of change for all of us.

Who ever heard of a mother’s persistent love of her child changing the world?