

I don't know about you, but today's Gospel story of the Canaanite woman, for years made me uncomfortable. This poor hurting woman comes up to Jesus and she's desperate: "*Jesus, Lord, Son of David, have pity on me! My daughter is tormented by a demon.*" We don't know what the illness was, but obviously it was very serious. Jesus doesn't even answer her... and his disciples tell him get rid of her: 'she's driving us crazy!' Jesus seems to agree with them and says, "*I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.*" In other words: 'because you're not a Jew, you don't qualify'... but the Canaanite woman was persistent and kept pushing him and Jesus finally said:

"Woman, it is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs."

Wow! Chalk it up to translation if you like – but, how much more insulting can you get?!

Sisters and brothers, just what is going on in the story? Traditionally, Scripture scholars tell us that the purpose of the story is to point out that Jesus' mission was first to the people of Israel – his Jewish community – and only after that would the mission be extended to all nations. Well that might be so, but it still doesn't answer the question of why Jesus seems to be so dismissive and actually rude to the poor, struggling woman filled with pain and fear for her sick daughter.

It's only in my later years that I've read some teachings from some Scripture scholars that, at least for me and perhaps for you, shed some light on this troubling Gospel story. It's a clear Church teaching – accepted by all the mainline Christian Churches – that Jesus was *fully human and fully divine*. [Remember your Baltimore Catechism...?] But in practice, his divinity is often emphasized and his humanity, downplayed. Actually, leading some to think that Jesus was just sort of going through the motions of being human and actually knew everything from day one: like while sucking his thumb in the womb, saying to himself: 'This is really boring, thank God that things will move along to more exciting times soon...!'

If we take Jesus' humanity seriously, we would understand that it was only gradually that he became aware of who he was... along the way, going through the "terrible twos" like any other two-year-old and imagine: his staying behind in the city as a teenager – not an atypical action of an adolescent coming of age... while Joseph and Mary were worrying themselves to death wondering where he was; and after three days telling them that "I had to be about my Father's business..." most likely didn't go over very well...!

Jesus, being fully human as well as divine, felt hunger and thirst, cried, got angry – so much so that he flipped over tables in the Temple! He could get irritated and show impatience.... In that light, might the story of the Canaanite woman show us that at this particular point in his human journey, Jesus shared the biases and prejudices of his own time and culture...? In this time in Jewish culture, a Canaanite woman would have been considered inferior, an outsider, a foreigner, that a Jewish man shouldn't even speak to in public... no better than the dogs.

But because of the woman's persistence and pleading, Jesus had a conversion moment: the cultural prejudice melted and he saw clearly that this woman and her daughter were children of God, loved by God, created in the image of God!

Unexpectedly, Jesus then not only answers her plea and heals her daughter, but praises her faith: *“Woman: great is your faith! Let it be done to you as you wish!”* In some ways this Canaanite woman was ministering and liberating Jesus.

+++++

Sisters and brothers, the events in Charlottesville, Virginia last week remind us once again that the evil, the original sin of the United States: racism – is still a powerful force. As disciples of Jesus, we join with people of goodwill in condemning white supremacy, white nationalism, the KKK and the neo-Nazis. These folks reveal clearly what we might call ‘conscious racism.’ Last week we reflected how the events in Charlottesville, Virginia clearly followed the cycle of violence: ignorance leading to fear; fear leading to hatred and hatred, to violence. None of us here today, I’m sure, is sympathetic with these movements.

But there is another kind of racism that white people succumb to without even knowing it ... the kind of racism Jesus and his disciples might have had a touch of in their own time ... called ‘unconscious racism.’ A person who would never consciously ridicule or discriminate or say prejudicial things, but who – on an unconscious level – has absorbed the cultural view, taught from childhood, that the white race is the standard that should be followed and that people of other races aren’t quite there. We’ve learned our cultural biases well; this would be the type of prejudice that Jesus might have been taught as of Jew; it could have been part of his and our “cultural DNA.” It is a form of racism that is not conscious, deliberate or intentional, but is very real and hurtful and damaging.

The best example I can give is one that I know I’ve shared in a homily once before:

During Hurricane Katrina, the Associated Press published two photos of people in identical situations in the flooded waters of New Orleans. The first photo, of a black young man carried the caption: “A young man walks through chest-deep floodwaters after looting a grocery store in New Orleans.”

The second photo, showed two white men – with the caption: “Two residents wade through chest-deep water after finding bread and soda from a local grocery store, after Hurricane Katrina came through the area of New Orleans.”

Now clearly, racial bias was at work...; but was it intentional? ...more than likely, not. Most likely it was unconscious racism: unconscious racism that associates crime with black and brown people ... and because those beliefs are unconscious they are so difficult to eliminate.

+++++

What can we do?

Sisters and brothers, first, the events of Charlottesville, Virginia offer a teachable moment for all of us who are white, to reflect and pray that any unconscious racism be eliminated within and among us. In addition, we can get to know people of color who we can trust to be honest with us, like the Canaanite woman was with Jesus.

In our parish just a week before the events in Charlottesville, a few of us got together to begin brainstorming about putting together a racism task force focusing in particular on racism that exists in the Catholic Church. We will be hearing more about this in the near future.

Finally for our reflection, I invite us to reflect on the following Statement on White Supremacy and Racism, crafted and (as of Friday) signed by over 450 Christian ethicists. I'd like to share a few points from the Statement, as we pray for the grace to commit ourselves to the following Christian values.

Let us stand and if we feel so compelled, to answer "We do" to the following:

"The greatest commandments, as Jesus taught and exemplified, are to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves; and so as children of God, and sisters and brothers to all,

- Do we reject racism and anti-Semitism, which are radical evils that Christianity must actively resist?
- Do we reject the sinful white supremacy at the heart of the "Alt Right" movement as Christian heresy?
- Do we reject the idolatrous notion of a national God? God cannot be reduced to "America's God."
- Do we reject the "America First" doctrine, which is a pernicious and idolatrous error? It foolishly asks Americans to replace the worship of God with the worship of the nation, poisons both our religious traditions and virtuous American patriotism and isolates this country from the community of nations. Such nationalism erodes our civic and religious life, and fuels xenophobic and racist attacks against immigrants and religious minorities, including our Jewish and Muslim neighbors. Do we reject the "America First" Doctrine?
- Do we confess that all human beings possess God-given dignity and are members of one human family, regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, or country of origin?
- Do we proclaim that the gospel of Jesus Christ has social and political implications? Those who claim salvation in Jesus Christ therefore must publicly name evil, actively resist it, and demonstrate a world of harmony and justice in the midst of racial, religious and indeed all forms of human diversity. Do we proclaim that the gospel Jesus Christ has social and political implications?

Last Saturday, Pres. Barack Obama 'tweeted' a quotation from Nelson Mandela's 1994 autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom," that became the most re-tweeted and "liked" tweet in Twitter history! He said:

"No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than it's opposite.

Amen!