

August 20, 2017

Is 56:1, 6-7; Rom 11:13-15, 29-32; Mt 15:21-28

What does it mean for someone, or something to be “foreign” to us? Well to start with, to be foreign can mean something that is strange and unfamiliar like a “foreign language.” It can mean something that is not supposed to be there like the “foreign matter” that you might find floating in your soup. It can also mean someone who you consider not part of your group - what we might call a “foreigner.” All these meanings have the effect of expressing some level of differentness and uncomfortableness between you and the “foreign” thing or person.

Foreignness is also more than a simple distinction. A distinction is like knowing that a friend lives over the border in New Hampshire and is therefore not a citizen of Massachusetts - but we still have cookouts and the children play together. To treat them as foreign is to say that that geographical difference makes them a different type of person to be looked at differently, and maybe not taken as a friend. A distinction is like saying that my mother was a Camerota and my father a Lundrigan and they loved each other and got married. Seeing the other as foreign is like saying he is a Hatfield and she is a McCoy and WE don't marry THEM. When we decide that something is “foreign” there is an emotional response of foreignness that exists on both sides. One person thinks about, and treats, another person as being foreign, and the other person starts to feel foreign. Foreignness is a state of mind; it causes separation between people - it is not the unity that Jesus is calling us to as brothers and sisters.

In the second reading, St. Paul is looking at the human tendency to use foreignness to join people together. He is speaking at a time when the Church was divided between the Jews who had accepted Jesus as the Messiah, and the Gentiles (the non Jews) who had accepted the faith of Christ and were joining the Church. Some of the Jews were saying that only Jews could be Christians. If you not one of US (a Jew) then you are one of THEM (the gentiles) and YOU don't have the same claim to the promises of Jesus Christ as WE do. The Holy Spirit showed the Church that faith in Jesus Christ, and being baptized and living as a member of the Church, not your birth line - or where you came from - makes you a Christian. In today's passage St. Paul says: *For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?* Weird line, what he is saying is: for some people, to reject others is what makes them feel like a special group - this is the way of the world. It brings some together as a select group, and leaves others out in the cold with no way to get in. St. Paul understood that to accept all those who are true believers brings them together in a larger group - a group who follow Jesus Christ and accept the demands that lead to eternal life in heaven. He knows that

God loves us all too much to say that this great promise is available only to people who came from a certain place.

God has always been showing that God does not hold to the divisions of foreignness like we sometimes do - God looks to the heart. Look at the first reading. God says through the prophet Isaiah: *The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ... their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.* God has been telling us that what joins people to God is not where you come from or who your parents are, it is about joining together in common belief and worship.

This brings us to today's Gospel. The woman who called out to Jesus was considered a foreigner by the disciples of Jesus. She calls out to Jesus, he doesn't answer - I wonder if he was waiting to see what the disciples would do. They respond by telling him he should send her away - "she is not one of US Jesus ... she's one of THEM." I think Jesus plays along to show them how they didn't get what God was saying through Isaiah. Although Jesus was not sent only to save one ethnic group - he says: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* The disciples don't respond (can you see them saying to themselves: "yeah you tell her ... US not THEM"). Then Jesus keeps going to show them how foolish their position is. After she again displays genuine faith, he says *It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs* - right guys? ... Ouch. He is really just exposing what the disciples hold deep down inside - and he shows how they lack the love of God in their hearts. The woman's faith is strong and she does not let her feeling like a foreigner stop her. She holds on to her faith in Jesus and doesn't go away. The disciples are speechless - I like to think they're perhaps reflecting on the foreignness mentality in their hearts. In front of those disciples who are so sure of themselves, Jesus points to the faith of this "foreigner," he accepts her, and he grants her request ... not theirs. He gives her what she asks for, and denies the request of the disciples to send her away.

The disciples think of her as a foreigner, they treat her like a foreigner, and as a result she feels like a foreigner. Jesus does not care where she came from, he only cares that she is willing to have the faith to join him. We may want to ask ourselves who are we more like? The disciples who look at origins and divide between US and THEM, the woman who feels like a foreigner, or Jesus who by his loving response removes the feeling of foreignness. The woman acts as one who wants to be part of the family, and that's how Jesus treats her. After that she feels - not as a foreigner - but as one of the group of disciples. Jesus calls us to have this love for all people, especially those who already share the same faith and worship we do, to bring us to one family of faith and worship praising God and living as disciples of Jesus Christ in the world.