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Church of St. Thomas More, NYC
August 16, 2020, 12:00 p.m., Streaming Mass
20th Sunday in Year Mt 15:21-28

Our first reaction upon hearing Jesus' conversation with the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel might be, "That's no way to treat a lady." Jesus appears rather rude, rather harsh in how He addresses her. Where might we get some clue as to what is really going on here? Let's try this. Movie buffs of a certain age might remember the verbal dueling Lauren Bacall and Humphrey Bogart would engage in on screen. Each would try to top the other by some kind of smart, quick, witty remark or come-back. This banter displayed a genuine respect and affection between the two of them.

Let's turn to today's Gospel. I am not trying to liken Jesus and the Canaanite woman to Bogie and Bacall, but there is a similarity between the way that Jesus engages this woman and the way that Bogie and Bacall spoke to each other on screen. In Jesus' time, the typical Jewish rabbi would simply have dismissed the woman, just as the disciples were urging Him to do. She already has two strikes against her: first, she's a woman, and therefore undeserving of a rabbi's attention; and, secondly, she's a pagan. But Jesus takes her seriously; He listens to her; He speaks with her; He engages her in conversation. He explains to her that His mission is limited strictly to the Jews, so she, being a pagan, is beyond the scope of His ministry. She will have none of that, and she challenges Jesus. She has chutzpah, and Jesus compliments her for this quality. He certainly doesn't call her "nasty." They toss back proverbs and witticisms to each other; they engage each other; they listen to each other; they respect each other.

Most surprisingly of all, Jesus changes his mind. We may think that Jesus being divine, being the Son of God, could or would never change His mind; that He had the manual, the playbook for his ministry, tightly in hand; that He had all the answers before he started out from Nazareth, maybe even from Bethlehem. We sometimes forget that Jesus was truly human, that He was "like us in all things, but sin" (Heb. 4:15). In fact, one of the first heresies in the Christian church was Docetism. The term comes from the Greek word to "seem" or to "appear." For the Docetists, Jesus only appeared to be human. It was as if He were wearing His body only as a mask or costume to facilitate the communication of His message. But our faith professes that it is precisely through His humanity that Jesus' divinity is revealed. In His openness to this woman, we see revealed the love of God that is open to all, excluding no one. Jesus accepts what she says—that His ministry must include non-Jew, as well as Jew. It is in this simple, everyday experience, in His conversation with this Canaanite woman,

that the Holy Spirit enlightens Jesus as to what His ministry is all about, giving it an even wider dimension than He initially imagined.

Perhaps the most significant part of the whole passage is that the woman is called a "Canaanite." There had not been Canaanites living in that part of the world in 1500 years. Today it would be like calling a Norwegian or a Swede a "Viking." So, who were the Canaanites? They were the people the ancient Hebrews conquered when, under the leadership of Joshua, they entered the Promised Land. Moses had ordered Joshua, "When you have defeated the Canaanites, you are to destroy them totally...Show them no mercy. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons" (Deut. 7:3-5). In short, they are a despised people. The "Canaanites" stand in for all who are different, for all who are "other." In this encounter Jesus, truly human, raised with the mind-set of the people of His day, would share all their biases, and so would view anyone resembling a "Canaanite" as inferior. But Jesus breaks out of those cultural stereotypes. Joshua showed no mercy. Jesus shows mercy in healing the woman's daughter. Joshua and Jesus are essentially the same name, but each shows very different attitudes to those viewed as "other." Jesus--Jeshua in Hebrew--in being led to change His mind, reveals that ethnic prejudice has no place in the Kingdom of God.

So, if Jesus could change His mind, about something that was so central to His ministry, shouldn't we be able to do the same about some of our own most cherished notions and ideas, especially those that dictate how "people like us" should think about "people like them?" The pandemic we have been living through has revealed what basically we have known all along, that racism is the "original sin" that has contaminated so many of our nation's most noble ideals and aspirations. We have seen how black people and other people of color are subject to all sorts of inequities in our society: inferior health care, shortened life-expectancy, inadequate housing, poor nutrition, low-paying jobs, segregated schools, disproportionate arrest and incarceration, and the list goes on. Isn't it time to see what has to be done and start doing something about it, just so that things can be more fair within our society? Too often issues are posed in stark polarities—one is painted as this or that, racist or non-racist. Truth be told, most biases and prejudices exist along a continuum; it is a matter of more or less. If we are honest with ourselves, we have to admit we have all been "contaminated" to some degree by the racism that infects our society. And, if we don't think we have, that may be the very problem.

Today's Gospel challenges us to follow the example of Jesus, to have a conversation with people who are different from ourselves, willing to have challenged some of the fixed ideas, biases and prejudices, that we have inherited from childhood.

If we can't find anyone with whom to have that conversation, we might read up on the subject of racism. Another possibility is to watch the late-night comedian, Trevor Noah's, Youtube presentation, "Dominos of Racial Injustice," The question is, will I be willing, when I see how some of those inherited notions would exclude black people and other people of color from experiencing the justice that God desires for all God's children; will I be willing to let go of those biases and prejudices, as was Jesus. Again, Jesus changed his mind; am I willing to change mine?