

August 16, 2020

Twentieth Sunday of Ordinary Time

Many of you know that my mother grew up in British Columbia and since our family lived near the Canadian border, we often crossed the border to visit relatives or the big city of Vancouver. Crossing the border was easy in those days. The lines were almost never long, we did not have to present any proof of citizenship and questions were short and to the point: "Where do you live?" Where are you going? How long will be staying in Canada? Are you bringing anything that you will leave in Canada? Have a good day." The only time I had any trouble crossing the border was when I was 16 or 17 and the customs agent asked, "What will you be doing in Canada?" instead of "Where are you going?"

I replied, "I am going to help my grandmother paint her house." He then asked me to park my truck, come into the office and answer more questions because I was taking a potential job away from a Canadian. He asked to look at my wallet and wondered why I was going to Canada with no money. I said, "I am going to my grandma's and she will feed me." I was sweating bullets!

Matthew's gospel presents Jesus as one who goes to the border of Tyre and Sidon, a place where if there had been customs agents, he would have been thoroughly interrogated. The Gospel does not give us a reason why Jesus would go where most Jews would not travel. A Canaanite woman also travels toward the border, taking a great risk, going to a region where she does not belong, and speaks to Jesus, who as a Jew and a man, she with whom had no right to say anything at all. We know why she dares to cross the borders of culture, land, gender and religion by her desperate words to him, "Have pity on my Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." Jesus's lack of response would have been the correct way to handle a woman who didn't seem to know her place. The Disciples too, when that ask Jesus to send her away, are behaving in a way that would have been culturally appropriate. The woman was persistent, "Lord, help me." Jesus's response seems to lack any kind of compassion at any level "It is not right to take the food of children and throw it to the dogs." Wow, what happened to Jesus, Mr. Nice Guy, The Savior of the world? Was he just having a bad day that day? The Holy Spirit would not have inspired these words to be preserved in Scripture if it were something as petty as that. Jesus knew what he was doing, yes, he was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel, that was his purpose, and the Gospel of Matthew was written for Jewish Christians who struggled to accept that their new-found Christian faith was also a faith for the gentiles. Jesus entered fully into their way of thinking and behaving and went to the border to bring the early Church to the border. There, at the border they encountered Jesus who changed his opinion, not so much for himself, as for his disciples. He showed them that this Canaanite woman had great faith deserved an answer to her prayer for her daughter be healed. Jesus not only

healed her daughter, he taught his disciples that his mission was to heal all human division.

We still see in our own time the boundaries that we as humans construct may start with the intent of protecting the common good and then can then morph into undermining the dignity of the human person. Sovereign nations have the right to control their borders and protect their people from harm. At the same time, in the light of the gospel, more powerful and wealthy nations have the moral obligation to accommodate those who come with real needs to their borders. Is not this what Jesus helped the early Church to see in today's gospel? Is he not teaching us to do the same today?

Let me try to bring this issue home. We depend upon the presence of international priests to staff our parishes. They bring with them the wealth of the spirituality and devotion from their countries of origin. Most of them are able to serve here with what an R-1 visa, or a Religious Workers Visa, which expires after five years. In the past, 8-10 months was plenty of time to renew their legal status in this country. Now we find that the rules change even as we going through their process and their R-1 Visa expires and they have to leave the country to start the process again. We are also finding that getting an R-1 Visa in the first place is becoming more complicated. We wonder if we will be able to have international priests come to our country in the future. Let me bring it even more close to home. As you know, the "Dreamers", those who came to this country as children without legal documents and are now here legally due to the Deferred Action of Childhood Arrival program (DACA), are also under question. Even though the Supreme upheld DACA in January, the program could still go. As most of you know, Fr. Carlos is a Dreamer. It is still possible that he could lose his current legal status and would have to return to Mexico to serve as a priest. Then there are hundreds of thousands of Dreamers like Fr. Carlos, who serve in the military, who are in college, who are getting married and are having children. Then there are still others who were willing to do anything to escape oppressive violence and crushing poverty in their homeland to risk coming here even if have to do so illegally. Many of them grow and prepare our food, clean our houses and wait on us in restaurants. Many are considered "essential workers" and work in conditions that don't allow for social distancing and so their rate of infection, sickness and death from the coronavirus has been higher than that of the general population. This is not about blaming this president to that one, or the congress, it is about us taking responsibility to be faithful citizens, to live our faith by raising up our voices.

Come to the border with Jesus. Allow him to show us a people of great faith who deserve to have their prayers answered.