

Fr. Curtis Miller August 15-16, 2020 Homily for the 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Why did God choose to specially favor the Jewish people? If God is the Father and Creator of everyone, why didn't He just choose to bless and favor every people and nation? Instead, God selected one people, the Jews, to whom He revealed Himself, made a covenant, and provided special protection and guidance. Why did God choose to reveal Himself so exclusively? It doesn't seem fair. As it turns out, God had a reason for doing this. To explain, I'm going to talk about a couple technical concepts from Biblical theology. It might seem a little too academic, but just bear with me because these concepts reveal something very relevant for our lives today.

Biblical scholars use the term "the scandal of particularism" to describe the question of why God revealed Himself exclusively to the Jews as His chosen people. It does seem scandalous that God would exclude the vast majority of people around the world in ancient times from knowing Him and having a relationship with Him. So why does He do this?

To answer this question, it helps to consider a pattern that shows up over and over again in the Bible: God chooses the weaker and the smaller, the younger and the lesser, in favor of those who would normally take precedence. For example, God blesses Jacob over his older brother, Esau, and He selects David over all his older brothers to become the king. This story repeats over and over again. Why? Because God shows His power by working through those who seem weaker in the eyes of the world. And so God selected the Jews, the people of Israel, to be His chosen people, a tiny, insignificant nation, instead of the powerful empires of the Egyptians, Babylonians, or Greeks. We would have expected God to choose a mighty, powerful nation, but by choosing a lesser nation, God truly shows His power.

Significantly, in all these Biblical stories in which God chooses a younger sibling over the firstborn, He does not forget or neglect to one who expected to be first. God eventually brings the blessing around to the firstborn. For example, Esau was jealous that his younger brother, Jacob, was specially favored by God, but Jacob later returned and enriched Esau more than if he would have been if things had taken their normal course. God is not playing a game of favorites. He is instead subverting the usual order of what we would expect, working through people and nations we might have ignored as insignificant, but then He still blesses the others later.

And so it is with the way God specially favored the Israelites. He chose them, blessed them, and performed wonders through them, even in spite of their small size and insignificance. But it is through them that God blesses the rest of the world. God sent His Son, Jesus, to be born as a Jew. He was the fulfillment of all God's promises to the Jews, their long-awaited Messiah. After first delivering this message to them, then the

Good News that Jesus was also the Savior of all people, was able to spread to the rest of the world.

This brings us to today's Gospel reading about Jesus and the Canaanite woman. It's a troubling story because we see Jesus acting very differently than we would expect. We like to think of Jesus being kind and loving to everyone equally, but here we see Jesus initially dismissing the pleas of this foreigner. We might attribute Jesus' seeming coldness to this woman to the fact that the Canaanites were pagans, enemies of the Jews, who practiced child sacrifice and many other evils. Even so, we're probably shocked to hear Jesus comparing this Canaanite woman to a dog. What's going on? Is Jesus being racist or prejudiced? No. Absolutely not. Instead, He is emphasizing the primacy of His mission to the Jews, and also putting her faith to the test. (and she ultimately proves to have great faith).

We see many times throughout the Old Testament when God puts people's faith to the test, most famously when He commanded Abraham to sacrifice his son, Isaac. Despite his reluctance, Abraham showed that he was ready to obey God no matter what, even to the point of lifting up the knife to kill his own son. Yet God immediately sent an angel to stop Abraham from doing any harm to his son, and to tell him that it had all been a test. Abraham had proven his complete faith in God, and so God blessed him and his descendants: the Jews. Jesus similarly puts this Canaanite woman's faith to the test by seeming to initially dismiss her pleas. Jesus says that He must first serve the Israelites, just as in a household the children are fed before the dogs, but the woman does not take offence. Perhaps she sees through Jesus' test, and she cleverly turns His analogy around by reminding Him that the dogs still eat the scraps that fall from the children's table. Pleased with her response, Jesus praises her faith and performs the miracle she had requested for the healing of her daughter.

Abraham and his descendants were chosen because of their faith in God. Now, that faith is spreading to the rest of the world. This Canaanite woman is proving by her faith that she belongs to God's people. The blessing God gave to the Jews was given to them so that it might spread. It was not given to be their own possession, but precisely so that it would spread and overflow.

So what does this have to do with you and me today? When God chooses or blesses us in some way, we are not to think that it's because we're better than other people, nor are we to see this blessing as our own possession or achievement. Rather, God chooses to bless particular individuals precisely so that that blessing will overflow to others. You and I have the gift of faith, not because we are better than others, but precisely so that we can share it, so that that particular blessing will become a greater blessing to others. So let's not hoard God's blessings, especially the blessing of faith. Let us share it boldly and persistently, so that faith might increase in all our family and friends to its full flowering.