

The underlying theme of this weekend's readings is pretty clear: everyone's included in God's offer of salvation. As the large number of generations from Jesus' time suggests, there may be a waiting list, but the truth remains that there are no exclusions. The gospel contains some language from Jesus that inclines certain people to think that there are exclusions though, since he calls the Canaanite woman a "dog."

My friend Al told me he gets offended every time he hears this gospel. Recently, with all the emphasis on racism there has been, he took me to task about it. "Tell me again how Christianity has the solution to the racism problem," Al challenged me. "Even Jesus used derogatory language towards someone who wasn't Jewish, like him."

"It sure sounds that way, doesn't it, Al," I agreed. "but maybe he used the term in service of a much more important revelation."

"Don't try to sugar-coat it, Tim," Al remonstrated, "he called her a 'dog.' It even says that in Greek – I know, I looked it up."

"If you really did look it up, Al," I said, "you'd have seen that the word Jesus used is the form commonly applied to a pet, not just a feral pooch rummaging through your garbage."

"He still called her a 'dog'," Al said.

"How about 'a loved family member that needs to wait its turn before it eats'?" I suggested.

"He still called her a 'dog'," Al insisted.

"You know, Al," I said, "the gospel gives no indication that the Canaanite woman took offense. Maybe she understood what Jesus was saying differently than you. Jesus was simply saying his mission was to the Jews first, then to everyone else. Everyone from St. Paul to Thomas Aquinas insists that God's will is that

everybody be saved, should we want to be saved, so something like that has to be in play.”

“I’m not convinced,” Al said adamantly.

“Let me approach it from another angle, Al,” I said. “There are some unique things about this gospel that might help you understand.”

“Like what?” Al asked.

“Fr. Ron Rolheiser explained to me a couple of years ago that this is the only gospel passage where Jesus is called ‘Son of David’,” I said. “The first time the Canaanite woman speaks to Jesus, she addresses him as the Jewish Messiah.”

“So?” Al remarked.

“The second time she speaks to him she addresses him as ‘Lord,’ meaning the ‘Lord of the Universe,’ not just the Jews.” I explained. “It’s understandable that a messiah would take care of his people – that’s what messiahs do. But the Lord of the Universe takes care of all creation.”

“In the moment,” I continued, “she’s inspired to recognize just who Jesus is. If a messiah might be concerned about feeding the home team first, the Lord of the Universe makes sure that everyone’s cared for – no exclusions. I should remind you also that the scraps from the table are the exact same food that the children were just eating.”

Al took that in. I could tell he was thinking about it.

“Do you have any idea what kind of food that was, Al?”

“Probably kosher, whatever it was,” he offered.

“Better than that, Al,” I said, “the food was love. The same kind of food, the same kind of love, that we enjoy in the Eucharist. The same kind of love that Jesus showed to the woman in granting her request.”

“Maybe I better read this passage in Greek again,” Al said. “It sounds like I missed a lot.”

“There’s one more thing, Al,” I said.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“As Jesus tells her she will have what she asked for, he tells her that her great faith has accomplished the deed. It’s the only place in the gospels where someone’s faith is specifically called ‘great.’ It wasn’t spoken of an apostle’s faith, nor a Jewish person’s, nor a man’s, but of a non-Jewish, pagan woman’s. Seems like Jesus is saying even female, pagan, Canaanite lives matter.”

“You asked me how Christianity’s a solution to the racism problem, Al. You’ve got to be able to see now that God’s love is freely extended to everyone, no matter what. Can we then allow God, living in us, to extend that exact same love to those around us, regardless of race or any other differentiating quality?”

Al looked at me and added, “And according to you, that should happen in the sequence that God thinks is appropriate?”

“Exactly,” I replied.

“Given the way things are going, Tim,” Al asked, “would there be something wrong with right now?”

I smiled at him, put my arm on his shoulder and said, “You’re a man of great faith, Al. Why don’t you just ask?”