

August 20, 2017

First Reading: Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Psalm 67

Second Reading: Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Gospel: Matthew 15:21-28

Homilist: Deacon Mike Mocek

Is there anyone here today who has never changed your mind about anything? I see no hands raised, and that's a good thing – it shows a lot of honesty. My hand certainly should not be raised either. It is a commonly accepted fact that we all change our minds from time to time, though some seem to do it more than others, and some may not do it enough. Changing our minds is an attribute of our humanity. It is sometimes even considered a right of our humanity. Any number of factors can cause us to change our minds – wisdom gained through knowledge, maturity, or a lived experience, or maybe just a whim. And, we change our minds about a lot of different things, from the mundane like what to have for dinner or what clothes to wear, to the more substantial like where to live or where to work. Perhaps the most important object of our mind changing is other people. We form opinions of others, sometimes prematurely, and then we may or may not change those opinions as we learn more – either about them or about ourselves.

In today's Gospel, we see Jesus change his mind. A Canaanite woman approached Jesus in desperation, begging help for her daughter who was being tormented by a demon. Canaanites were Gentiles and ancient enemies of Jews. Initially, Jesus ignored the woman. Then, when his disciples urged him to send her away, he told her that he was there for the children of Israel, and "it would not be right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs." This insult only fueled the woman's persistence, and she replied, "even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters." Upon hearing that response, Jesus changed his mind and possibly even his heart. He told the woman, "great is your faith!" and her daughter was healed.

So, what is going on here? How could our loving, compassionate, and forgiving Jesus first ignore and then insult this desperate woman? Those actions fly in the face of everything we have been taught about Jesus. Though we cannot know what was going through the mind and heart of Jesus as this incident unfolded, we can explore several possibilities. He may simply have been testing the faith of the woman, or he may have been setting his disciples and us up for a teaching moment. The incident could also be giving us some insight into the humanity of Jesus. Scripture tells us that Jesus grew, "in wisdom and age." He did not come into this world fully developed and all-knowing. His encounter with the Canaanite woman may have given Jesus insight and understanding about God's plan for humanity – that God's salvation is offered to all people and all nations, just as we heard in today's first reading from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. Ultimately, Jesus rejects the customary Jewish labeling of Canaanites as "outsiders," "foreigners," and "enemies" of Israel. Rather than dismissing the Canaanite woman, he accepts her as a child of God.

Regardless of whether Jesus was testing, teaching, or growing, his encounter with the Canaanite woman is a huge opportunity for us to learn and to grow. It calls on us to reject the labels that we often place on others and to see the face of God in every person we meet. The start of a new school year recalls a classroom story that illustrates that call. A teacher walked into her classroom carrying a jar filled with a thick, golden-colored liquid. She asked the students to identify the contents of the jar. After a few wrong guesses, someone finally said, "honey." "Correct," replied the teacher. Then, she placed a label on the jar that said, "vinegar." "Now, what is in the jar," she asked. "It is still honey," replied several of her more astute students. What a different world this might be if we all could extend this simple lesson to our relationships with others. The labels that we place on one another obscure our true identities and create unnecessary boundaries that lead to groupings of "us" and "them." This "us" vs. "them" mentality is at the root of the violence we have seen recently in

Charlottesville, Barcelona, and elsewhere and it fuels the fear and hate that pervades our world today. So, let us learn and grow from Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. Let us see through our labels of race, creed, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, and even political orientation. Let us reject fear and hate. And, let us focus on what really matters – that we are all children of God.