

Inclusion or Exclusion

August 16, 2020, Twentieth Sunday In Ordinary Time – Gospel of Matthew 15:21-28
Fr. John

We are living, as they say, in 'interesting times'. Interesting indeed!!!

A viral pandemic has turned our world upside down and in the middle of all this, there is a social revolution centering around racial relations, the likes of which we have not seen since perhaps the 1960's. Events surrounding the Black Lives Matter movement in the USA and in Canada, the calls to action from the Truth and Reconciliation commission, have triggered an exposition of underlying prejudicial attitudes that many do not like to admit or even flatly deny.

Systematic racism that has been long built into our society, however, is not something peculiar to our era as evidenced by our readings today.

The enmity and mistrust between Jews and gentiles had a long history biblically. There seems to be few instances wherein there were occasions to find some common ground. For much of the Old Testament, the Jewish people were defending their religious heritage against their pagan neighbours and even had their hands full within their own ranks trying to keep their people faithful to the covenant that God had initiated with them through Moses.

This is the setting in which today's gospel reading takes place where Jesus and some of his disciples are taking some respite time in foreign territory. At this point it seems that Jesus himself had an 'in house' understanding of his mission when he tells the Canaanite woman, 'I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel' and then further refers to the Canaanites as 'Dogs'. Later on, as our second reading indicates, Paul would get into 'hot water' with his fellow Jews for expanding his missionary efforts to the gentiles. Fortunately, for the Canaanite woman, her persistence and desperation would ultimately be met by a compassionate response from Jesus who was impressed by her faith. This same understanding and compassionate attitude on Jesus part would be replicated in other encounters with those outside of the Jewish community-like the healing of the Roman centurion's servant and the woman at the well of Jacob in Samaria.

So what does it take to break down the walls of prejudice, racial bias and exclusion? Obviously, it takes some personal interaction with those with whom we differ in order to understand their experience of life and where they're 'coming from'. Jesus was impressed that the woman would go to such great lengths to find healing for her daughter as I'm sure any parent would do likewise for their seriously afflicted child.

In the larger picture the daughter's healing became a bridging point in the relationship of two hostile cultures. It was an indication of how compassion and understanding can only take place when people dare to meet and come to know and respect one another as friends. These are graced and holy moments and we need many more of them.

And so I wonder, what ways lay open to you and me to make these encounters possible. What leaps of faith, big and small can we take to make our community, our country and our world a more just and compassionate place.

Over a week ago, a young man, Tristan Derocher, walked over 600 km from his home in northern Saskatchewan, and set up a teepee on the Legislature grounds to draw attention to the many young people who had committed suicide in light of the deep poverty and hopelessness rampant in their communities. Maybe Tristan is not unlike that Canaanite woman. What would Jesus response have been? What would OUR response be?

'For my house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL peoples,' says the Lord through the prophet Ezekiel.



Perhaps that house of prayer today looks somewhat like a teepee.