

HOMILY 20th Sunday In Ordinary Time

August 16, 2020

There was a pastor who wanted to conduct an experiment to see the different ways homeless people are treated compared to people who were better off. On a downtown city side street he parked a van that contained a hidden camera. He dressed as a man in donated clothing that was ill fitting and worn. He got out of the van and collapsed on the sidewalk. People literally stepped over this man. He became invisible to people because of his poverty. The man got up, returned to the van and changed into a business suit. He got back out of the van and once again collapsed on the sidewalk. People rushed to his aide. He was no longer invisible. How many of you are surprised by what happened? I must admit that I wish this was not so, but I am not surprised that this happened. Bias, conscious or unconscious, can cause us to ignore or avoid people that are not like us.

I must admit that in the Gospel reading today, Jesus is not acting the way that he normally acts. However, I think we need to remember that Jesus was fully human and fully divine. He was a product of the culture he grew up in and feels those feelings that we feel. He would have had some of the same biases we have. When the woman first calls out, “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David. My daughter is tormented by a demon.” Jesus absolutely ignores her. I think Jesus is taken off guard and is not sure what to do or how to respond. First of all, he would never address a Jew and would sooner die rather than ask for help from an enemy. Secondly, she was a woman. Women were considered to be the property of their fathers and husbands and had very few rights at the time. She should not be addressing a man that she does not know in public without her husband or father. Third, she calls him Lord, Son of David.

She is calling him the Messiah. How did a gentile woman know that? The disciples had not figured that out yet. So no wonder Jesus was struck speechless. The disciples told Jesus to send her away and that would have been the socially acceptable thing to do. But Jesus did not do that. He tells her, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” And that was true. Jesus’ ministry was primarily to the Jewish people. When he first sent the disciples out to do ministry, he told them specifically to reach out only to the lost sheep of Israel and to avoid gentile territory. When the Canaanite woman is persistent, Jesus responds, “It is not right to take food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” This sounds terribly harsh. Scripture scholars speculate that this was probably a proverb at the time that meant something like charity begins at home. We have some proverbs that are rather offensive today and we no longer use them. I am not going to list them because I do not want to be offensive, but you probably know what I mean. The Canaanite woman continues to be persistent and Jesus heals her daughter. Now that is the Jesus that we know and love. I think he recognized his unreasonable biases.

The other thing that is rather troubling is why did Jesus leave Galilee, travel 50 miles to Tyre and Sidon, gentile territory, just to immediately travel back the 50 miles to Galilee? The only thing that happened in Tyre and Sidon was this encounter with the Canaanite woman. Maybe that was the entire reason he made the trip. Maybe he was just supposed to have this encounter with her and maybe the disciples were supposed to witness it. Maybe when Jesus later gave the disciples the Great Commission to spread the Gospel to all people, the disciples could go back and recall how Jesus broke all cultural and social norms in helping the Canaanite woman. Maybe that was his way of breaking down some of the biases of the time. I firmly believe that this is how God frequently works in our lives. He brings people into our lives that

we need to encounter. Maybe God the Father led Jesus to the Canaanite woman. I frequently ask myself why I am connecting with the person in line at the grocery store, or the wait staff of the restaurant, or the person I run into at the hospital on my way to see someone else. I think many of these meetings are not chance at all.

I think sometimes we miss the opportunities that God is offering us when we just immediately react according to our biases. Like the people in the story I told at the beginning of my homily, I think we have a lot of biases against homeless people. We like to think that they are totally different from us, which means we can never be homeless. We sometimes blame them for their poverty, they are just lazy and do not want to work. They are not very bright, they are all drug addicts, alcoholics or mentally ill. When we meet someone and we want to distance ourselves from them, I think we need to ask ourselves why. What are your biases and which ones are reasonable and which ones do you want to overcome. Some of our fears are reasonable and some are not. The only difference between helping and not helping the man was the way he was dressed. Many of us may be hesitant to stop and help a homeless person who collapsed, but I think many of us would at least call 911. God brings people into our lives for a reason. Make sure you are open to discovering what that is.