

## Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: Faith Leads to Faith

This Sunday's readings are very difficult. We have Paul seeming to speak in circles to the Romans, "you have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy." Then we have the incident of Jesus and the Canaanite women. She has a real need, and she cries out to him. But He refers to her people as dogs, and says that he came only for the lost sheep of the House of Israel.

The best way to understand all this is to realize that the readings are speaking about the spread of faith. The reading from Romans refers to the many times that Paul visited various cities. When he visited a city, he preached to the Jews first. If they rejected the Gospel of Christ, Paul then preached to the gentiles. Often, the Jewish people were so inspired by the faith of the Gentiles that they took another look at Christianity and opened themselves up to faith. That is why Paul says that their being closed to faith, disobedience, resulted in the gentiles turning from their sins, their own disobedience to the natural law, what they knew was right or wrong. Experiencing the gentiles receiving faith, this led many of the Jews to embrace faith.

In the Gospel Jesus plays the role of the traditional Jew, at odds with the rest of the world. To the traditional Jew, the Canaanite Woman would have no claim to the gifts God bestowed on the Jews. Jesus states this in his dialogue with her. But she still receives healing for her daughter. Why? Because she had faith in him. Faith is more powerful than ancestry. This passage in the *Gospel of Matthew* occurs right after the passage where Jesus calls Peter a man of little faith. He tells his disciples that this gentile is a person of great faith.

Faith is a raging fire. It spreads from person to person. When we are exposed to a person of faith, our faith grows. As our faith grows, we ignite others with the fire of God's love. As others grow in faith, our faith increases. The Fire is the Fire of the Holy Spirit. Nothing can stop the flame. Nothing can stop the Spirit.

Let me give you an example of this. Most people are led to faith by their parents. They, in turn, lead their children to faith. Then something happens where they experience their children's faith. Maybe it is something a child says during bedtime prayers. Perhaps a child becomes very sick and says that he knows God is taking care of him. Experiencing the faith of their children, parents grow in faith. I am sure many if not most of you have experienced this. Your faith brought your children to faith. Then their faith brought you to an even greater faith.

When it comes to the Fire of Faith, the Love of God, the Holy Spirit, we have got to allow God to be God and experience His Presence however and whenever He calls out to us. We cannot do this if we put Him into some sort of box that we have created, describing how God can and cannot act. Nor can we tell others that we have the inner knowledge of whether God is in their lives or not.

Everything that we do. Everything of value that happens here in Church and in our lives is about the Love of God whom we have been graced to know as Jesus the Christ. The Mercy of God is infinitely greater than people's concept of his mercy. God is infinitely greater than human beings. Human beings put others in hell if they do not fit into their nifty box that they label this or that religion. In today's Gospel, human beings decided that since the Jews were the chosen people, Jesus should not bother with that Canaanite woman. "Send her away," the disciples said. In the early days of the Church, St. Paul and others had to confront the fallacy that gentiles could not become better Christians than those Christians who had been fervent Jews.

If we were to shut others out of our lives due to our own inflated self worth, our own pride, we would deprive ourselves of being inflamed by the fire of God they have been given by the Holy and Merciful One. Billy Graham's daughter sat in the third row from the front at the funeral of Pope St. John Paul. Why? Why was she given this place of honor? She was there because the Vatican recognized and respected the Power of God present in the Billy Graham ministries. (By the way, there was a close friendship between Billy Graham and St. John Paul II. Billy Graham told the story of the audience he had with the Pope. They exchanged gifts and then spoke for a while. Then, Graham said, just before he left, there was a pause in the conversation. "Suddenly the pope's arm shot out and he grabbed the lapels of my coat," Graham later recalled. "He pulled me forward within inches of his own face. He fixed his eyes on me and said, 'Listen Graham, we are brothers.')

St. Paul's wrote to the *Galatians* chapter 3 verse 28: *There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*

John Oxenham grasped the spirit of this and put it into a hymn we often sing at Mass, "In Christ there is no East or West, there is in him no south or north; but one great fellowship of Love, throughout the whole wide world." John Oxenham was a Methodist.

Jesus sees all that is good within the human heart. He saw the faith of the Canaanite woman. He sees your faith and my faith. He knows how we are trying our best to serve Him. How wonderful is that? He knows us better than we know ourselves. He Loves us more than we love ourselves.

We have a wonderful priest in our diocese, Monsignor Anthony Diaz. He's retired now and recently has slowed down quit a bit. But every time we have a general meeting of priests, Msgr. Diaz calls out, "Throw fire!" And we all laugh and say, "Fire," Tony, "we need fire." He is right. This is what we have been called to do. We are called to throw the fire of God's love upon the world. To do this we have to allow ourselves to be exposed to the fire of God's love in others.

Faith leads to faith. O Woman of Cana, O gentile Christians, your great faith has

led us to faith.

May we have the humility to experience God's love in others and the grace to lead others to faith.