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by Thomas Gumbleton

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We discover a very strange Jesus in today's Gospel, one who will not even at first talk to someone who comes to him pleading for help, someone who even suggests that she's like a dog: "Give the bread of the children to the dogs." What we are seeing is a Jesus who was deeply convicted of the truth of the Jewish religion. In this very unusual incident in his life, we can learn, I think, two very important truths. First of all, we all know and we say very readily that Jesus is Son of God and Son of Mary; he's both human and divine.

I think, however, that even though the mystery that we profess indicates that there's no crossover between the human and the divine (they're two completely separate natures in the person of Jesus), we tend to think that somehow Jesus, through his divinity, would have known that it was right to reach out to this woman. But Jesus was fully human; he was like us in every way. He had to learn; he had to change.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Psalms 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

Romans 11:13:15, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

[Full text of the readings](#)

Yes, he had to change as he went along and discovered human reality, human truth. In this instance, he was living out what he had learned as a pious Jew: all other nations are rejected; you don't have any dealings with those who are outside the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah. So when Jesus is confronted by this woman from outside the Holy Land, from the Canaanites, the first enemies of the Jews as they came to the Promised Land, when he's confronted by her, he wants to reject her as any Jew would at that point.

But she persists and gradually, through the dialogue, Jesus begins to have a different understanding. He begins to understand that yes, he is to reach out to her

just as he is to reach out to any other person who is in need. Jesus learns; Jesus changes. To me, and I presume to all of us, this really is a profound mystery. Here the Son of God has to understand truth in a way he had never understood it before. He has to change what he has thought all the years he was growing up.

It really is an amazing reality that Jesus can be fully God and fully human — one like us in every way except sin. Through this dialogue, when Jesus goes back and forth with the woman, and she kind of overcomes him in the dialogue, he calls her a dog. She doesn't get angry; she says, "Yes, but even the little puppy dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." Jesus knows he's defeated in this dialogue. He understands this woman has a faith that can't be broken and he says, "How great is your faith. Your child is healed."

Now the lesson there for us is that we, too, as we continue to listen to the scriptures, as we continue to study the life of Jesus, come to know him more deeply, we must begin to change, to let ourselves become more and more like Jesus. In this instance, also, the second lesson is: no one is excluded from the love of God. We can't have the kind of violent disturbances that we've been having in our nation over the past days and weeks where people are divided against one another, become violent against one another.

We try to push certain people away from our group. They push us away from their group. That's not the way God intends it to be in our human family. Everyone is equal in freedom and dignity and grace — no exception. We can't push people away because of their religion, because of their ethnic background, their nationality, the way of life — whatever it is. Those divisions must be broken down.

We have to become one human family within the love of God as shown to us by Jesus in this incident in the gospel. If we reflect deeply on today's scripture lessons, we find that in the first lesson, Isaiah, many years before Jesus, has said, "My house will be a house of prayer for all peoples." That's what God intended back in the time of the prophets like Isaiah. In our second lesson, St. Paul struggles with what's going to happen with the Chosen People.

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He doesn't know and can only say finally, that he trusts that God somehow will allow them to participate in the fullness of life that Jesus brings to us. Then of course, finally, in the Gospel lesson, we see Jesus carrying out this command of God: you must love everyone; draw everyone into your community. We have to break down the barriers that separate us, that divide us, that cause hostility and hatred and violence. We must build bridges.

I hope that we will listen deeply to these lessons, come to know more profoundly the mystery of Jesus as Son of God and Son of Mary and learn together with Jesus how we have to listen, enter into dialogue, and be willing to change. When we learn these lessons, we will be able to help break down the violence and the anger and the hatred that is in our midst. We will help to build the community of God's people as a people where love exists for every person. As we build up that community of love, we pray that we can come to know Jesus more deeply and follow him more faithfully.

[Homily given Aug. 20 at St. Philomena Parish in Detroit. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are [posted weekly](#) to NCRonline.org. [Sign up here](#) to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.]