

20th A

August 14, 2011

Do we have anyone here today who was born in a different country than the US? Please stand. Now, if at least one of your parents was born in a foreign country, please also stand. And now, if at least one of your grandparents was born somewhere else, please stand also. We don't have to go back very many generations, do we, to get to other countries?

Today is a story about Jesus dealing with a foreigner, a woman from Tyre and Sidon. Matthew calls her a Canaanite, reminding his readers that for centuries, her people were the enemies of the Jewish people. She lived about 25 miles on the wrong side of the border of Israel. At the time of Jesus, Jews believed that the borders of their country were set by God, and those borders determined who was right and who was wrong. The land of Israel was considered holy because it belonged to God. The dirt on their side of the border was considered holy! To Jews at the time, all other lands, all other people, were unclean, second-class.

Jesus crosses into Tyre and Sidon, and an unclean woman, a foreigner, cries out to him. Will Jesus welcome this Canaanite woman, or turn her away?

You know how timely this question is: refugees and immigrants are streaming into countries around the world. Countries like England, France, Italy. They bring different languages, new culture, non-Christian religions with them. In our own country, we hear that immigrants from the south take jobs we want, pay no taxes, devour our health care, commit more crimes. [The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops would beg to disagree.] (Justiceforimmigrants.org)

Here is the US, of course, we are a NATION of immigrants. Nearly every one of us here has some ancestor who arrived in this country with little money, not knowing the language, or with a thick accent, needing a job. My mother claimed that she remembered signs in stores that said, "NINA." (No Irish Need Apply.) Her father's name was Farrell. My great-great grandfather came from Germany, I suppose to find a better life. Fifty years before that, Native Americans were driven off their land by Europeans.

Jesus heard the woman from Tyre and Sidon shouting after him to heal her daughter. He would have remembered that 600 years earlier, the prophet Isaiah quoted God as saying, "My house shall be called a house of prayer for ALL peoples."

She shouts again. *This is the only time in all four Gospels where Jesus refuses to heal someone.* He responds, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of Israel." It is shocking. Even Jesus struggles to believe that God's mercy should be extended across the border, to lesser people whom God had not chosen.

Scholars believe that this brave woman may have actually changed our Lord's mind. God's house, God's love and mercy really are for all people. They are all God's children. Even Canaanites.

Jesus finally gets it. The daughter—a foreigner, a non-Jew--is healed. St. Paul will later become the Apostle to the Gentiles. This morning, Mass will be celebrated in 185 countries, in several hundred languages, by people of all colors. God's house has indeed become a house of prayer for all peoples.

How difficult it is to be that kind of country, which opened its arms to our ancestors, or possibly to us.

When my time comes and I knock on heaven's doors, my papers will be all messed up, I'll have packed all the wrong things, I won't speak the language of heaven, and God in his mercy will say, "Welcome to your new homeland!"