

Pent10_Proper15A_081714
All Saints

Today's Gospel lesson is one of those that is uncomfortable to hear. Like other sayings of Jesus -- such as, 'I come not to bring peace, but a sword,' and 'I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law,' -- we are brought up short when our long-held vision of Jesus as the gentle Savior, meek and mild in the picture on the walls of Sunday School rooms is confronted by the harsh words he speaks to the Canaanite woman in Matthew.

Jesus is in foreign territory - not in Israel - when a Canaanite woman approaches him. She is shouting at him, pleading with him to cure her daughter. Jesus ignores her. His disciples aren't too thrilled to have her there and they ask Jesus to send her away. The Canaanites and the Israelites are enemies. The Canaanites do not worship the God of Israel. They do things differently. They are 'others' as far as the Israelites are concerned. Unclean. 'Them' not 'us.' And to top it all off, this Canaanite woman is...well, she is a woman! There was nothing worse.

Jesus' reply to the woman - or to the disciples - or maybe he was just talking to himself, working things out, out loud - his reply is: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Is he telling the woman that he does not need to concern himself with her because she is not like him? Or is he reminding himself of what he believes his mission to be? I don't know.

No matter what he was thinking when he said it, I bet the woman heard a rebuke. She was probably used to hearing that sort of thing - because she was probably poor (or else she wouldn't be bothering to approach an itinerant preacher/healer from another land with her problems), and because she was JUST a woman, and because her daughter (another female) didn't have some ordinary illness but was inhabited by a demon. Why would anyone say anything nice to someone like her?

The mother persists, however, coming to kneel before Jesus, and saying, "Lord, have mercy."

It's at this point in many of the other stories about Jesus that he would say to the person asking for his help, "your faith has made you (or your son, or your mother-in-law, or your daughter) well." But Jesus stuns the woman - and us - by using a racial slur. He calls her a dog. It was the equivalent of using the 'N' word.

How could he do that?! Why was he so hateful?

Again - I don't know.

But - again - the woman persists in her pursuit of healing for her child. She says to Jesus, "even the dogs get to eat the crumbs that fall from the master's table."

That woman - that 'other' - challenges Jesus and his idea of what God's kingdom is all about. And despite their differences, Jesus is able to learn from her, to see that God's desire is that all people are deserving of mercy and justice, no matter who they are or where they come from.

You know, we plain old humans are really all the same. That's not news, I know, but sometimes it is worth repeating since we often tend to act as if 'others' have come from another planet! American, African, Asian, European - short, tall, heavy or thin, blue eyes or brown, black hair or blond, dark skin or light, our DNA is almost identical.

Beyond that, we are alike in many other ways. The people of China or Russia or Mexico or Iraq or Alabama are all concerned about the cost of housing and food, about what the future will be like for our children and about what is the meaning of life.

Yet, instead of all those things drawing us together, we continue to look at our differences, however inconsequential they might be, and allow them to pull us apart.

Think of the current state of politics - red states versus blue states.

Or, in the Christian religion, division between Protestants, Catholics and the orthodox, between liberals and conservatives, between those who ordain women and those who don't, between those who baptize babies and those who don't, between those who bless gay marriage and those who don't, between those who have "*the truth*" and those who don't.

Do you know that, according to the World Christian Encyclopedia, there are over 33,000 different Christian denominations? That's 33,000 organized bodies of

Christians - people who couldn't agree with another body of people worshipping the same God - who broke away from another body of people -- who broke away from another body of people - who...well, you get the picture.

And that's not to mention the non-Christian religions!

No wonder what we see on the news is the fighting in Israel, in Gaza, in Iraq, in Syria and in Ferguson, Missouri. What the hell is wrong with us????

God, help us!

Is there a way out?

I'm not naïve enough to expect that everything can be fixed with one solution, or one sermon, but there seems to be a bright light that is beginning, at least, to change the conversation. If you are on Face Book, you have probably seen some of the posts from the page called '*Humans of New York*.' If you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it. And even if you aren't on Face Book, there are real, hold-in-your-hands books by the creator of this site.

'Humans of New York' was begun by a guy named Brandon in the summer of 2010. He likes to take pictures, and after having been fired from his Finance job, he decided, as he says on his FB page, "it would be really cool to create an exhaustive catalogue of New York City's inhabitants." So he set out to take pictures of 10,000 New Yorkers and plot the locations of where he took the pictures on a map. Along the way, he says, he began to ask people questions as well as take their portraits, and he included some of their quotes and short stories about them. These pictures and stories have become a most fascinating glimpse into the lives of strangers - not in a voyeuristic way - but in a way that makes most of 'them' seem just like 'us.' They talk about their lives, their loves, their losses, their happiest memories, their hopes and dreams, their disappointments and failures.

I think it is significant that there are over 9 million people who follow this man and his photographs and the stories that are true for so many of us. All you have to do is read the responses written by those who see the pictures.

Apparently, the United Nations - yes, the United Nations - thinks his work is significant, too, because beginning a couple of weeks ago, they sent Brandon on a

UN World Tour - at least, a 50-day trip in partnership with the UN, supported by the Secretary General's Millennium Development Goals Advocacy Group. His job on this tour, which will only visit 10 countries, but will span over 25,000 miles and circumnavigate the globe, is to "listen to as many people as possible" as he gathers portraits and stories, and to raise awareness for the Millennium Development Goals.

The MDGs are eight international development goals that every member of the UN agreed should be accomplished by the year 2015 - in other words: "they're stuff that everyone can agree the world needs." (Like, eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, reducing child mortality, combating HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases)

So far, he has been in Iraq and Jordan, in cities, villages and refugee camps.

In one photo from Iraq there is a man and his three young daughters standing in an open-air market, a couple of bags of fruit in their hands. The dad says, "I worry about the day they start to want things that I can't afford."

Another picture is of an elderly couple in a mall. Both of them hold prayer beads in their hands. One of them says, "We just want to be together and not be afraid."

A third picture is a teenager out in a field, with a towel on his head and a baseball cap on top of the towel. Behind him, in the field, are a lot of sheep. He says, "I'm a student. My parents didn't want me sitting around the house all summer, so they made me be a shepherd."

A picture from Jordan is one of a man sitting at a table with his son standing next to him. The father says, "He lived with his mother in Gaza when he was very young. One night, I talked to him on the phone before bedtime, and he told me he was wearing three pairs of pants to bed. I said: 'Three pairs of pants? Why aren't you in your pajamas?' He told me: 'Because I want my body to hold together if a bomb falls on me.'"

The reason I am telling you all this about Brandon and *Humans of New York* is because in the two short weeks he has been on this tour, the comments on his pictures have taken on a decidedly different tone from that of the usual comments on regular FB posts.

Here are some of them:

- "Thanks for humanizing the 'enemy'..."
- "Some things are the same everywhere"
- "Our problems are so insignificant to theirs"
- "Thank you for creating a photo series that shows wherever we are - we are all human. For showing that whatever language we speak, we can understand each other just fine."
- The people and stories shared make me grateful each day for those I love, those I have in my life and those I had in my life and the fact that I live in peace, have a job, my health, family and loving friends. Thank you. I am humbled each day.
- "War may sometimes be a necessary evil. But no matter how necessary, it is always an evil, never a good. We will not learn how to live together in peace by killing each other's children."
- Thank You. Thank you for showing the REAL people of the Middle East. They are not terrorist. They are not animals. They are not religious fanatics. They are people that want to raise their children and love and laugh. Just like us.
- These posts show that no matter WHERE you live, where you're from, we all want the same things. Health and love and safety are clearly top priorities.

Jesus met the 'other' and learned of the wideness of God's mercy.

If only 10% of the 9 million people who follow this opportunity to meet the 'others' of the world then change their opinions about those 'others,' surely there is reason to hope that mercy and peace can be accomplished.

God, let it be so!