

Father O'Connor's Homily for 16 August 2026
20th Sunday in Ordinary Time-A

Isaiah 56: 1, 6-7
Romans 11: 13-15, 29-32
Matthew 15: 21-28

A man rushed into the supermarket on a Saturday to pick up some snack items. The playoff game was going to be televised, and he planned to watch it with his family and friends.

The store was loaded with shoppers. And as he headed for the 12-items-or-less express lane, a woman cut him off, pushing a shopping cart piled high with groceries. The man was fuming.

The express lane cashier motioned for the woman to come forward. Then he looked at her overflowing cart and asked ever so cleverly: "So madam, which twelve items in your cart would you like to purchase today?"

That story reminds me a bit of the spirit of today's Gospel about the woman who was clever enough and determined enough to have her request for a healing for her daughter granted by Jesus. Let's look at this Gospel together.

This is the only occasion that we know of in Jesus' public life when He ventured outside of Jewish territory.

There was no place in Israel where He could escape from the crowds. He wanted to prepare His disciples for His upcoming passion and death. So He went to the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon because no self-respecting Jew would follow Him there. But even in this foreign territory He still encountered the demands of human need.

There a Canaanite woman came to Jesus and pleaded with Him: "Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon." But Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.

His disciples said to Him: "Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us." They saw her as a nuisance. They wanted Jesus to get rid of her.

But for Jesus there was a problem. He said: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." His mission was to begin with the Jews. And here was a Gentile woman crying for mercy. There was only one thing for Jesus to do: He would awaken true faith in her heart, and then He would heal her daughter.

The woman then came and did Jesus homage, saying: "Lord, help me."

Jesus responded to her: “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.”

To call a person “a dog” is ordinarily taken as an insult. But the facial expression and the tone of voice can make a great difference.

We can call a friend “an old devil” or “a rascal” with a smile and a tone that can cancel-out the sting and replace it with affection. I picture Jesus saying this to the woman with a smile on His face and with compassion in His voice.

And the Greek word for “dogs” here does not mean the mangy street dogs that ate from the garbage dumps. But rather the household pets that would sit at your feet and climb into your lap.

So the woman, with her clever wit, replies: “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.”

And Jesus’ eyes must have lit up with joy: “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And the woman’s daughter was healed at that very hour.

What can we learn from this Canaanite woman and her encounter with Jesus?

First and foremost, she had love. She made the suffering of her child her own. Although a pagan, she approached this stranger, Jesus, and even accepted His silence and His apparent rebuffs out of love for her daughter. And there is nothing nearer to God than love that comes from the heart.

She also had faith. And it was a faith that was growing through her meeting Jesus. She began by calling Him “Son of David,” a popular political title. She ended by calling Jesus “Lord.” Jesus wanted her to see that “a request to a popular healer” must be turned into “a prayer to the living God.” And she did.

She began by following behind Jesus. She ended by offering homage before Jesus on her knees. She started with a request. She finished with a prayer. We learn from her experience that, for us, as people who have already received the gift of faith, is the other way around: we must first come to Jesus **in prayer**. And then **with our requests**.

And this woman had the gift of cheerfulness. She had her troubles and yet she could still smile. God loves the cheerful person, whose eyes sparkle with the light of hope.

This loving, faith-filled and cheerful woman did indeed move through the express lane to faith in Jesus, and then she received from Him an answer to her shopping cart of prayers.

This Gospel invites us to learn a lesson or two about prayer from this foreign lady's encounter with Jesus that, no doubt, changed her life – and can change our lives – for the better.