

Fr. Nick Dant's Homily, Saint Matthew Catholic Church, Indianapolis
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Aug. 15-16, 2020, Cycle A

We find a very determined mother in our gospel story, who pleads with Jesus to heal her daughter. She reminds me of three mothers awhile back who called themselves “brain-tumor moms.” They were three mothers in Massachusetts who banded together after all three received the heartbreaking news that their daughters had cancerous brain tumors. Bent on advancing progress beyond what pediatric brain research had so far accomplished, these “brain tumor moms” raised \$250,000 in one year alone by walking, pleading and repeated asking, despite frequent rebuffs. Nothing fuels a mother’s determination more than her concern for her child’s well-being.

Our mother in our Gospel story is equally determined. But, the gospel writer of Matthew makes it a point to let us know that this desperate woman pleading for help is a foreigner; and not only a foreigner, but a Canaanite woman. The Canaanites were hated enemies of Israel – those with whom Israel had struggled with over the years for possession of the land.

Now, never before had Jesus ignored someone who pleaded with him for compassion and mercy. In Matthew, chapter 9, when two blind men begged Jesus to restore their sight, He quickly did so. Also, in chapter 9 of Matthew when a synagogue officer pleads with Jesus to do something about his daughter who just died. Matthew tells us Jesus rose immediately and followed the official to his house. But with the Canaanite woman, Jesus ignores her. The Gospel passage tells us: “Jesus did not say a word in answer to her.” Jesus’ disciples became so annoyed with this hated foreigner, that they urge Jesus to get rid of her. So, Jesus finally responds to the woman that he has nothing for her; he tells her: “I was sent only to lost sheep of Israel.” Therefore, not being an Israelite, Jesus has no blessing to give her. Again, though, foreigner or not, nothing fuels a mother’s audacity to ask more than her sick and suffering child. The Canaanite woman becomes more determined than ever, and this time she gets down on her knees right before Jesus, stopping him in his tracks does him homage and pleads: “Lord help me.” Jesus remains determined too, and reminds the woman just exactly who she is: “It is not right to take food of the children (Israelites) and throw it to the dogs (foreigners, Gentiles, Pagans). Rather than turn away at Jesus’ insult, or return insult for insult, this determined mother redirects her desperation, turning Jesus’ words to her advantage, but remaining respectful toward Jesus: “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their master.” And with that something shifts in Jesus; He realizes that all human beings share a common humanity, and even foreigners can have greater faith than Israelites at times. Impressed with the faith of this woman who was not even raised as a Jew, Jesus says: “O woman great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

With this encounter with the Canaanite mother, Matthew is developing the themes he began His Gospel on with his infancy narrative of the Magi coming over to homage to the newborn King of the Jews. It is the theme that salvation is for people, all nations – no matter their cultural, ethnic, racial or religious background. All are welcomed to the Kingdom of God; God’s blessings are to be offered to all people, no matter whom. In Jesus, walls of separation are pulled down and borders of division are obliterated. In Jesus, we must realize that there really is no us or them, but only an us who stand in the need of God’s mercy. As the Prophet Isaiah put it so well “God’s house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”