

Those of you who have been part of our St. Mary's community for some time may remember my brother, Jim. He came to mass whenever he stayed with Paul and me for the weekend. Jim loved St. Mary's. He delighted in teasing Kirby Brown, calling him Fr. Kirby; he was quick with a handshake for Fr. Tony, and he thoroughly enjoyed coffee hour—not only the abundance of goodies but also the opportunity to chat with everyone, happy to let them know that I was his older sister. All of you who interacted with Jim were warm and welcoming, always making him feel accepted for who he was.

This wasn't always the case for Jim. He was born with Down Syndrome which made him "different" from the normal population in his physical appearance, his intellect and his speech. I recall with sadness the times I witnessed people either turning away or staring at him because of his differentness. Sadly, in doing so, they didn't get to know the wonderful, funny, great guy Jim was.

In today's Gospel reading we hear about a woman who was also known to be different. She was a Canaanite, a Gentile, a woman who was part of an ethnic group that the Jewish people believed were pagan and corrupt. Not surprisingly, then, the disciples wanted Jesus to "send her away" even as she had come to beg Jesus to save her daughter who was tormented by a demon. And the initial silence by Jesus gives us the impression that he will, perhaps, send her away. But that is not what happens.

Jesus first response was to say, "I was sent only for the lost sheep of Israel". It's important to note, however, that this story does not take place in Israel. It takes place in Tyre and Sidon, which is the land of the Gentiles near the modern-day country of Lebanon. None the less, with his response, Jesus was making it clear that his mission was primarily to the Jewish people of Israel. This doesn't stop the persistence of the woman, however. She kneels and asks for mercy from the person she does acknowledge as the Lord, the Messiah, the Son of David. When Jesus continues by saying, "It is not right to take food from children and give it to the dogs", (kind of a derogatory statement) he is labeling the Jewish people as children and the gentiles as dogs..like a family's pet. Again, her response is powerful. She reminds Jesus that even dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the master's table. In doing so she is asking for mercy, for the saving grace of God. And Jesus rewards her faith by healing her daughter.

In reading and reflecting on this Gospel passage, 3 things stood out to me. First, Jesus and his disciples have left Jerusalem because the elders and Pharisees are beginning to turn against him, questioning whether he really is the Messiah. They travel to the land of the Gentiles where he is immediately recognized as the Messiah by a Canannite woman. Second, Jesus, for the first time performs a miracle in the land of Gentiles. He is expanding his ministry beyond just to the

Jewish people of Israel. Third, in doing so, his message becomes clear that the grace of God is given to all people who believe, not just the chosen few. This is the important message for all of us as well. Jesus invites everyone into the kingdom of God; it's not a matter of ethnicity or social status, or gender or background. All are welcome.

This message that all are welcome, all are accepted is echoed in our other readings from today. In the reading from Isaiah we hear, "All who love the Lord are welcome; My house shall be a house of prayer for ALL people"; the refrain in our responsorial psalm is "Let all the nations praise you", and in Paul's letter to the Romans we hear, "God will have mercy on all".

If our God welcomes all and does not limit her mercy and grace to only a select group aren't we, as followers of Jesus called to do the same? But what does it mean for us to be welcoming? To show mercy and grace to all?

Over the last several weeks we have heard powerful reflections regarding what we need to do in our community and our nation to be more welcoming, to recognize how individual and systemic racism has led Black people feel less than welcomed; less than equal. In our nation we have and continue to marginalize other racial and ethnic groups as well. As the previous presenters have stated, all of us are called to look at what we, individually and collectively can do to change this. As they suggested, maybe that means we educate rather than argue; that we clear the cobwebs and get to the spider; that we speak in words that are truthful, helpful, inspiring, necessary, and kind; that we join with others to claim and act on our beliefs. Perhaps, as Jeanne shared in her homily last week, "we need to do more than be little faithers; we need to be more spiritually awake, more spiritually grounded in our words and actions.

God's call to us to be welcoming to everyone extends well beyond just to those who are racially or ethnically different than us. There are other areas where we need to ask ourselves if / where we have been less than welcoming, whether it be toward people with disabilities, those who are homeless, people with mental illness, or those who are gay, lesbian or transgender--any person or group that is different than me and my group. Do I welcome these people or do I turn away or stare? We may each want to challenge ourselves to look at what causes us to be less welcoming—is it fear? Prejudice? Or do we hold onto stereotypes that are not accurate? I suspect we won't become more welcoming, more merciful, more gracious until we recognize why we haven't been that way in the first place.

Before closing, I want to take a moment for all of us to look at our personal lives. As I have been reflecting on my own life in light of our Gospel passage, I realize there are people in my life who are "close in" ---part of my circle of family and friends, and they are not so different

than I am. Yet, at times, I'm not very welcoming toward them. How often I have been less than kind or welcoming to a family member or friend who annoys me? Maybe it's a relative who has political views that I think are crazy; maybe it's a sister-in-law or brother-in-law who never seem to grow up; Perhaps it's a neighbor who isn't taking the COVID pandemic seriously, or a friend who doesn't listen as well as I think he should. The poet, David Whyte wrote a poem called Start close in, and the first stanza reads:

Start close in,  
don't take the second step  
or the third,  
start with the first  
thing  
close in,  
the step  
you don't want to take.

With these words I think he is reminding us that it is sometimes those who are closest to us that we can be the most unwelcoming toward. We show them little mercy or grace. I would invite all of us in the week ahead, as we continue to explore the political and racial divisiveness in our community and nation to start close in---to ask ourselves to whom among my family and friends might I be more welcoming, more kind and more gracious? Surprisingly, that might be the hardest step but also the most needed and most rewarding.