

Fourteen years ago, this fall, I entered into the process of formal formation and study for the permanent diaconate. The very first professor I encountered was unpopular among those in formation as he immediately began to challenge our beliefs and conceptions about God and about ourselves. And he did it in a particularly controversial way. Many of the people complained, formally, to the director, to each other, and I even remember one person saying he complained to the Bishop.

I think the shock of it was that we were not expecting this kind of method of imparting the faith. It was foreign to many, it seemed contradictory and confusing.

I was in the definite minority.... I liked this guy. He challenged me to go beyond the boundaries of my pre-conceptions about God, about society, about others and about myself.

When I read today's Gospel, I immediately thought of that experience, because, here, Jesus does not act as I think He should. That calls me to think and stretch and look beyond my own prejudices about others, and even about God.

We all have our ideas about how God should act, and this Gospel, frankly, doesn't fit those expectations. We are asked to look at our God and our relationship with Him, and, perhaps most challenging, His relationship with others, in ways that perhaps we haven't.

All of the readings today deal with God's love and acceptance and offer of salvation to all peoples, and that should give us a big-warm-fuzzy feeling. But Jesus snaps us into the grittier reality, that love for Him and love for others is sometimes tough and challenging.

I am inadequate in being able to explain Jesus' immediate behavior toward this woman. In my study and preparation for the homily, I came across a number of explanations that I found to be, well... also inadequate.

And I realized that there are a whole lot of people who are much smarter than I am that can't satisfactorily reconcile the bluntness of Jesus with the Jesus we are comfortable with.

Oddly, the only person I see in this story who isn't taken back by the encounter... is the woman. Humiliated, embarrassed, shamed? ..... maybe.....

But she doesn't seem to be phased by any of that. She continues, through the banter and the insults, to assert that Jesus is Lord and that He can heal her child.

This is her faith... Even though I am small, even though I am not of the right people, place or religion, even though, technically, my people are your enemy.... you... will... have... mercy. I am everything that you are not, and yet I expect you will meet my need.

And Jesus calls her faith great. In all of Scripture, Jesus only uses the word "great faith" in relation to this woman. And because of this "great faith" Jesus does what He said He would not do. Jesus changes His mind.

And that, my friends, I realized was the real source of some of my uneasiness with this Gospel. Jesus behaves differently, in both His treatment of another person... and in that He relents.

We are taught to believe that God is rigid, un-flexible and immutable. Frankly, we are more comfortable with an all-knowing, the all-powerful God. Intellectually, we also know that God is all-loving and all merciful.... But we are, over all, more at ease with cowering and groveling before God than we are just being in His presence.

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This has great implications for our prayer and for our own interior life and therefore, our relationship with God. And here is the shake-up...

Do you think that Jesus can still change his mind, as he did with that Canaanite woman? Can we influence Jesus as she did? Well, I admit, I do not know the answer to that. But I don't think anyone can say with absolute certainty that they do either.

This much I know. When we pray to the Lord, we shouldn't be just going through the motions. There is a real conversation going on, as there was with the woman in this Gospel passage, which means that prayer is far

simpler than we make it out to be, because we all know how to converse.

The Canaanite woman in this Gospel reminds me of another resourceful and witty woman - St. Teresa of Avila, who lived in the 16th century. She had a very special relationship with God, and she wrote a great deal, describing her experiences with God. She is one of only 33 Saints given the title of Doctor of the Church. "Doctor of the Church" is a title given to those whose writings are deemed to be in accord with the doctrine of the church and which the church believes can be used as teachings.

One of the famous stories about her is the time that she was riding in a donkey cart and it was overturned, throwing her into muddy water. She said to God, "If this is the way you treat your friends, then it's no wonder you have so few of them!"

In one of her writings, Teresa gives us some advice about prayer:

*(Quote) "Remain in the Lord's presence continually, and speak to Him, pray to him in your necessities, and complain to him about your troubles; be merry with him in your joys... All this you can do without set prayers, but with words that fit your desires and needs. This is an excellent way to advance in prayer, and very quickly." (End quote)*

In another place she simply says, "Avoid being bashful with God, as some people are." Isn't that a refreshing thought?

We can also learn from Mary, the Mother of Jesus. In Luke's Gospel when she finds her lost 12 year old son in the Temple, she talks straight with him: "Son, why have you done this to us? Your father and I have been looking for you with great anxiety." Mary wasn't bashful with Jesus. She was his mother, and she talked to him like a mother.

In John's Gospel, at the wedding feast of Cana, Mary tells Jesus that they've run out of wine. Jesus says, "My hour has not yet come." What

does Mary do? She turns to the stewards and says, "Do whatever he tells you." Despite what Jesus said to her, she expects him to do what she asked. And he did.

We need to give that a try. Not as an experiment, but as a leap of faith.

I suspect that few of us really talk to Jesus that way. We can learn from that Canaanite woman, from Teresa of Avila, and from Mary. We might discover how close Jesus really is to us, and how close we are to him. We might discover how easy it is to pray.

I suggest that you and I, sometime today, talk straight to Jesus about whatever we wish. I think we'll enjoy it. St. Teresa was right: "This is an excellent way to advance in prayer... and very quickly."