

Cycle A 20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Reading 1, Is 56:1, 6-7

Thus says the LORD: Observe what is right, do what is just; for my salvation is about to come, my justice, about to be revealed.

The foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, ministering to him, loving the name of the LORD, and becoming his servants— all who keep the sabbath free from profanation and hold to my covenant, them I will bring to my holy mountain and make joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and sacrifices will be acceptable on my altar, for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

Responsorial Psalm, Ps 67:2-3, 5, 6, 8

R. (4) O God, let all the nations praise you!

May God have pity on us and bless us; may he let his face shine upon us. So may your way be known upon earth; among all nations, your salvation.

R. O God, let all the nations praise you!

May the nations be glad and exult because you rule the peoples in equity; the nations on the earth you guide.

R. O God, let all the nations praise you!

May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you! May God bless us, and may all the ends of the earth fear him!

R. O God, let all the nations praise you!

Reading II, Rom 11:13-15, 29-32

Brothers and sisters: I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch as I am the apostle to the Gentiles, I glory in my ministry in order to make my race jealous and thus save some of them. For if their rejection is the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?

For the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable. Just as you once disobeyed God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now disobeyed in order that, by virtue of the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God delivered all to disobedience, that he might have mercy upon all.

Gospel, Mt 15:21-28

At that time, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman of that district came and called out, “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. Jesus’ disciples came and asked him, “Send her away, for she keeps calling out after us.” He said in reply, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But the woman came and did Jesus homage, saying, “Lord, help me.” He said in reply, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Please, Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters.” When Jesus said to her in reply, “O woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And the woman’s daughter was healed from that hour.

“...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”

The readings today raise the question about insiders and outsiders, particularly in our Christian communities. They make clear that with Christ there are no outsiders. It is one thing to define membership in a group. It is another thing entirely when the definition defines acceptability that may harm or exclude “the foreigners”, “the other” in our lives. We must ask ourselves, are we inclusive or exclusive? Isaiah spoke of a time when outsiders would join insiders in worshipping God...The Lord said His *“house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”* In the Gospel, Jesus broke out of His Jewish cultural and religious identity that limited Him. He finally blessed the persistent and faith-filled Canaanite woman whose very gender, whose history of being a prime enemy of Israel, and whose pagan religion made her a very unsuitable outsider. Who among us would have persistently pleaded with Jesus as she did? But Christ responded to her faith, and made her an insider. He directs us to take the same action, to be inclusive, not exclusive. Our cultural and religious biases must never stand in the way of God’s grace. When Pope Francis prayed with Christians, Jews and Muslims in Jerusalem in 2014, calling them *“dear brothers”*, he showed us that in the unity of mankind there are no outsiders....God loves us all, no matter how diverse we are...His invitation of mercy and salvation is for everyone.

I believe, we here at St. Andrew are assuring everyone is an insider as Jesus has challenged us to do. We are working hard to welcome people and remove barriers that marginalize others because of our cultural or Catholic biases. In fact, I think all our ministries demonstrate that we don’t want anyone to miss an opportunity to experience God’s mercy and grace. We don’t ask, “Are you Catholic? We ask, “How can we help?”

Let me give you an example of how to make a difference serving God by promoting dignity and participation of people who many think of as outsiders. Over the past 10 years I have been involved with Family Promise, a faith-based organization of 20 congregations and dozens of volunteers serving homeless families in Forsyth County. If you can imagine, today over 800 students in Forsyth County schools are identified as homeless, with most living in unstable multi-family environments. I came to know fellow ministers from dozens of faith-based

congregations... including a Jewish Synagogue, the Latter-Day Saints, two Mosques, two Hindu Temples and many Christian denominations of every persuasion. The Imam of one of the Mosques, which has 250 families with over 500 children, was very welcoming during our visit and served a wonderful lunch.... we discussed their interest in helping the homeless, and we also shared our faith in the one true God of Abraham. I had to smile when he told me that his name Isa means Jesus in Arabic, and that he named his first daughter Mary...after the revered virgin mother of Jesus in Islam...Mary, who the Quran mentions over 70 times, and whose 19th chapter is named after...and which says Mary was the greatest women who ever lived. I smiled because we know that everything Mary does is to guide us to her son. Maybe one day it will be their devotion to the Virgin Mary that will lead Muslims to Jesus, who they recognize as the great “Anointed One” and “Promised Messiah”, but will then come to truly know that He is the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Son of God. By far, most of the ministers I met know how important outreach ministry is for their congregations to thrive and grow in faith. One Pastor said, “it may be counterintuitive, but you have to give away the love of God to fully receive His love.” Unfortunately, I also met a couple of ministers who aren’t ready to be inclusive. They don’t mind serving “the other” of different faiths as clients on their terms, but they are not yet ready to serve side-by-side as volunteers with them.

So, what we should be most concerned about? We need to make sure we are breaking down the barriers that keep people outside, not building barriers around our ministries, or in fact, our church. If we isolate ourselves, we can’t fully serve God. We need to be welcoming, and continuously make improvements to convince more people that we are all insiders. As Pope Francis said at World Youth Day 2 weeks ago, *“there is space [in our Church] for everyone, and when there isn’t, please, let’s work so that there is ... for [whoever] makes mistakes, for who falls, for who it is difficult.”* Departing from his prepared speech, he asked all the young people *“repeat with me: ‘Everyone, everyone, everyone!’”* before waves of “todos, todos, todos” spread throughout the crowd. He said, *“That is the church, the mother of all...there is room for all.”*