

20 Sunday A

August 17, 2008

Cathedral

5:00 and 10:00

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*“Why in the world do different approaches to our Father in heaven separate any of us?”*

**“Thus says the Lord...for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.”** Yes, **“for all peoples”**: that is God’s all-embracing promise given long ago through the prophet Isaiah.

In the spring I was sent an email by a couple whom I have known for more than thirty years, going back to the first parish in Memphis where I served following my ordination as a priest. This couple wanted me to know about a tender incident that had happened this past spring—surprisingly, in a cemetery, at the grave of their daughter.

I was with this couple last Christmas—at the time of the funeral of their daughter Kellie. I first met Kellie when she was nine years old at St. Paul’s Parish in the mid-1970s. Later, after her college education, Kellie entered the Peace Corps and served in the West African country of Senegal, where she also met her husband. She eventually decided to dedicate her life to the people of Africa and, following further education, spent the next 20 years as a public health specialist focusing on HIV/AIDS prevention.

Shortly before this past Christmas Kellie was killed in an automobile accident in the country of Mali, where she had served since 2004.

Kellie’s parents were and are very proud of their daughter. They also love their Catholic faith and, with that faith, it stretched them as far as they could go that their daughter chose to live her life on the other side of the world, and chose a husband from Senegal. His different ethnicity and culture, his Muslim faith: these stretched Kellie’s parents as she and her husband became parents of three young sons in Africa.

Their email to me recounted what happened this spring at Calvary Cemetery, where Kellie’s body is buried. Her husband Karim returned for a visit, and the family met at Kellie’s grave. They wrote to me how their Muslim son-

in-law, before approaching the grave, took off his shoes and then walked to the grave, kneeling reverently there and praying. Then it just happened: Kellie's mother asked her husband to get out of his pocket his rosary (they often prayed it at their daughter's grave), and then asked Karim to show them his beads of the Islam faith that he had been fingering in quiet prayer. They talked about their beads and experienced a moment of God's closeness in the very midst of their differences. Kellie's parents have given me permission to share this experience, and their final rhetorical question at the end of their email: "*Why in the world do different approaches to our Father in heaven separate any of us?*"

Their horizons expanded. They changed.

So did Jesus in today's Gospel.

She was a "Canaanite," as the Gospel tells us. That's an old word, an angry word, a bitter word. When the Jewish people came to the Promised Land, they drove out the Canaanites. And, in today's story Jesus found himself in pagan territory, and you don't mix with *them*.

**"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."**

But the Canaanite woman wouldn't give up and, eventually, Jesus changed. And for those of us who are of non-Jewish ancestry, we can thank the Canaanite woman. She opened up horizons and, with much difficulty, over the centuries the church has widened its embrace. In fact, this Sunday by God's mercy, *all of us* are welcomed in!

These days we've enjoyed the Olympics and, in its pageantry, we've watched the procession of the world's nations. It's a snapshot of oneness in all our diversity. And yet, especially since 9/11, we're in a world engulfed in a "clash of civilizations"—violent clashes, more often because of religion than nationalism. Many from other perspectives look at us Christians, and they point out that too many wars—from centuries ago up to now—have started with the sign of the cross. And yet, with penitence, we know that such violence contradicts our Savior's witness before his cross. At the same time, we look with fear at terrorists who likewise betray the best of Karim's Islam faith—and we can be prone to wholesale condemnation.

**“O woman, great is your faith!”** It was a chance meeting—the Canaanite woman and Jesus. Last Sunday we heard Jesus say of Peter, who first led our church, **“O you of little faith!”** However, this outsider—a Canaanite woman—she had **“great faith.”**

Amazing how God works, isn't it. A chance meeting this past spring at a daughter's grave, and horizons broadened, with God very present.

Sisters and brothers: our world is changing. And we'll have chance meetings too with people far unlike us. May God's promise come true, that **“my house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* peoples!”**