

Lines

I was thinking of giving one of those warnings we get sometimes from the radio or t.v. news before today's gospel was read.

You know: "The following contains language that some may find offensive."

After all, we are used to a Jesus who welcomes, who heals, who holds out his arms wide to even the despised.

But that's not what we get today.

Today we get Jesus who first ignores a mother's wail for help, who then tries to move her along, who then calls her "a dog."

Remember when that Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at President Bush a few years ago?

He hollered as he threw: "You dog!"

Calling outsiders "dogs" in the Middle East apparently goes way back.

So today's reading is, without a doubt, one of the hard readings of the Bible.

It's a reading that puts Jesus in a light we don't usually see.

But it's an important reading because it reminds us that just as Jesus was fully divine, he was also fully human.

Over these last few weeks, probably most of us have been mesmerized by the fully divine Jesus.

Two weeks ago, he feeds the 5000.

Last week, he's walking on the raging waters.

It doesn't get more divine than that!

But if we lift the covers on those same events, in that lifting, we may see our Lord, **not** as divine, but as fully human.

Just before feeding the 5000, something momentous happens.

His friend, his mentor, his cousin, John the Baptist, is murdered by Herod on the whim of a dancing girl and her scheming mom.

That horrific news sends Jesus into the wilderness, looking for a quiet place to pray, to reflect, to prepare for the day he sees coming, when he, like John, will be killed.

Those 5000 who got fed follow him out into the wilderness, and in his compassion, he teaches them, heals them and feeds them.

Once done with that, he sends the disciples on ahead, so that maybe now, finally, he can have some quiet to reflect and pray.

It is not to be.

The disciples boat is tossed in a violent storm on the Sea of Galilee and Jesus comes to the rescue.

Making landfall, Jesus and the disciples head off for pagan territory.

Perhaps now he's found a place where no one knows him, a chance for some peace and quiet, a chance to come to grips with John's death, at last; only to have this pagan woman screeching and shrieking, imploring him to heal her demon possessed daughter.

It's not so hard to understand the exhaustion Jesus feels when he at first ignores her.

It's not so hard to hear the frustration in Jesus when it seems for all the world that everyone wants something FROM him, but nobody has a clue of what he actually has to GIVE.

The apostles don't get it.

The religious leaders think he's a heretic.

John is dead.

And now this.

A pagan woman hollering after him at the top of her lungs when all he needs to do is pray.

Who among us hasn't felt that kind of overwhelming pressure to be everything to everyone?

If you give to a starving child fund one month, your mailbox is suddenly filled with requests from twenty other charities.

Look around the world, our nation, our neighborhood, and it's easy to throw up your hands and say, "It's too much!" "The needs are too great."

And so we draw lines.

Lines around those we can help, lines that keep everyone else out.

Most often, the lines we draw include our family and friends.

Those most like us.

All others: sorry, you're out.

There's only so many resources, so much time, only so much patience, to go around.

And that's where Jesus seems to be today.

"I came for the lost sheep of Israel," he says.

"I only have enough for my own, I only have food for the children, there's not enough for the dogs."

A line is drawn, just as surely as if he hunkered down and drew the line in the dirt with his finger.

Yet this pagan woman keeps crossing the line.

"Lord, Son of David!" she calls him, recognizing him as the Messiah when his own people, his own disciples, keep missing who he is.

She accepts the insult, and turns it around: "Even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table," she says.

And something in Jesus moves.

Something in Jesus awakens.

Just last week, he's chiding the first of the apostles, Peter, for his *weak* faith.

But today, he embraces this pagan woman for her *great* faith.

Jesus erases the line he has just drawn.

And suddenly, Jesus comes to understand his ministry is not just for Israel, it is for all of us.

He comes to understand that he *has* the strength, he *has* the resources, he *has* the ability, and, most crucially, he *has* the desire to erase all lines between all people, and to open the gates of the Kingdom of God to everyone.

In this encounter, Jesus opens his arms wider and wider, until the whole world is counted as God's own.

He opens them wide, all the way to the cross, where his open arms, nailed to the tree, plead with us to do the same.

The miracle we see today is to watch as the layers of who she is are peeled away in her encounter with Jesus.

Off comes the Gentile, off comes the Canaanite, off comes her worship of pagan gods, and what is left is a grieving mother, desperate for a cure for her troubled little girl.

That peeling away is what Jesus calls us to as well, so we can get to the person inside the protective layers of race or nation or ethnic group or class or color.

That insufferable fellow over there, so smug and self-righteous; start peeling away and you may find a small boy damaged in childhood by loveless parents.

That homeless gal over there, start peeling away and you may find a keen mind, thirsting for a better life.

And as we peel away the outer appearance, what we may find in every person we meet is a person before whom the angels march, crying out: "Make way for the Image of God, make way for the child of God!"

If our Lord and Savior had trouble with lines, it's no wonder we do too from time to time.

But just as our Lord and Savior comes to see that lines are only for the erasing, so too we are called to embrace whoever is put before us.

So it's no surprise that Matthew's gospel ends with exactly that command.

Jesus makes his way to the cross, and, arms outstretched, lifts the whole world to himself.

He is raised from the dead.

Meeting his friends on that final mountaintop, that pagan woman is there, not physically, but there nevertheless, because Jesus, from the mountain, commands his friends, commands us, to "Go out, and train everyone you meet, far and near, Jews and Gentiles, in this new way of life ... and I'll be with you as you do, right up to the end of the age." Mt 28:19-20.

Sitting here today, you and I, Gentiles all, owe a great debt to the pushy lady who helped even our Lord erase lines between people.

+amen