Peace be with you! “Great is your faith!” That is the phrase Jesus uses to respond to the Canaanite woman in our Gospel from St. Matthew. He says this in response to her request that he heal her daughter who is sick. “Great is your faith!” Could the same be said for me and for you our time of sickness in this COVID19 crisis? What might this Gospel from St. Matthew mean for us today?

The interpretive key for this particular Gospel is that Jesus crosses the border. Jesus deliberately withdraws from his Galilean homeland and crosses the border. Jesus withdraws to the region of Tyre and Sidon. Those two cities mentioned in today’s Gospel still exist. They are cities in Lebanon, just south of Beirut, where we saw the terrible nitrate explosion last week that killed hundreds and injured thousands.

Like today, Jesus crosses over into a land filled with rivalries and conflicts. He deliberately places himself in a new country and a new land. He crosses the border. He meets people who are not Samaritans and are not Jews. He meets people culturally different from himself. Jesus meets this Canaanite woman because he has placed himself in a foreign situation.

The great fourth-century St. Augustine in preaching this same Gospel passage notes the same. He writes, Jesus “…having gone beyond those borders, insistently sought to heal this daughter that was beset by the devil.”

But also note this. This Canaanite mother also crosses a border too. She crosses over to him. She is not Jewish. She is a Canaanite woman. But she has a sick daughter. She had heard of Jesus. She addresses
him as if she were a Jew. "Son of David," she cries out to him with the Jewish title of Jesus, "have pity on me." She says that she has a sick daughter tormented by a demon.

What advice do the disciples give to Jesus about this Canaanite woman? "Send her away." The verb in the original Greek biblical text is "diabalein." You can hear our modern world "diabolical" in that ancient Greek word. The devil disperses. Jesus unites. The devil divides us from each other but the Jesus unites us to be brothers and sisters. The devil divides us through temptation to sin. But Jesus unites us to our deepest selves reminding us of the great people God made us to be. This is why Jesus takes so seriously the complaint of the Canaanite mother about the demon that torments her daughter.

Initially Jesus tells her that his mission is only in Israel and not in what is today Lebanon. She pleads with him to attend not only to the lost sheep of Israel but the lost sheep of every nation. "Please Lord, for even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of the masters." As a result, Jesus learns from the Canaanite woman that his mission is to save, not only the lost sheep of Israel, but the lost Gentiles too!

Thus, the positive and healing response of Jesus: "Oh woman, how great is your faith." Jesus is amazed. He is deeply moved by the faith of this Canaanite woman who know little about his Jewish faith. He is amazed and touched by the faith of a foreigner.

Would Jesus be amazed at our faith too? Can we say the same about ourselves during this COVID-19 pandemic? Do we call to greet others by phone if we cannot visit them? Do we cross over the border of this pandemic?

Even more, do we learn from those different from ourselves? Are we open to learn from people who speak a different language or come from a different culture? Do we promote harmony between our Spanish- and English-speaking communities here in Central Washington. Are we respectful of both American and Mexican cultures? Do we see the beauty of faith live our Mexican brothers and sisters? Do we rejoice in our American experience of faith too? When we look at each other do we find ourselves echoing the words of Jesus: "Oh woman, how great is your faith?"

How great is YOUR faith? How does your faith change the way you see your daily life? Pope Francis never tires of quoting Pope Benedict XVI on this topic. "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." (Deus Caritas Est 1) This is precisely what we see in this encounter between the Canaanite woman and Jesus. She had already heard about Jesus and it changed the fundamental orientation of her life to the point of pleading for her sick daughter.

"Great is your faith." As bishop, those are my final words to all of you today. Thank you for the many ways you engage the steep demands of this Gospel. Thank you for considering the challenge of the Gospel. Thank you for the many ways you echo the words of Jesus. “Great is your faith!” Peace be with you.

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