

“Woman, great is your faith” (Matt. 15: 28)

This affirmation by Jesus is a ‘behold’ moment in the Gospel passage for the 29th Sunday in Ordinary Time. When the evangelists use the expression ‘behold’ it could quite literally mean ‘hang on to your hats, because you won’t believe what happens next’.

At the beginning of the narrative, Jesus is quite clear about his mission: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. At the beginning the Canaanite woman is quite clear in her demand for assistance – in a sense it is her right. As the story continues, it is the woman who changes her stance first. Rather than demanding, she comes and kneels before Jesus and makes herself vulnerable, pleading for Jesus’ help. In this action, she demonstrates her faith in Jesus and her total dependence on his compassion and mercy. She confesses her need and her faith and is open to receive the gift with gratitude.

Of course, there is always more going on in the story than meets the eye. Just as at the wedding in Cana, Jesus is quite certain of his call and mission – “My hour has not yet come”, so he is not sent to anyone outside the community of Israel. And just as Mary’s gentle push moved Jesus to perform his first miracle, so this Canaanite woman’s faith and dependence moved Jesus to grant her request. It is in this moment that we are invited to ‘behold’ as Jesus attests to the woman’s faith and heals her daughter.

The question the gospel poses is: “Am I ready for and open to ‘behold’ moments when they occur in my life? Whether I am contemplating my vocation for the future, whether it be marriage, single life, religious life, priesthood or have already responded and am living the vocation to which God has called me, am I willing and ready to see my life and vocation differently than I see it or am living it? Am I open to the work of the Spirit and able to adjust my plans and see things differently? I might have a pretty clear idea of where God has called me to live as a religious priest, but if I am not open to adjust that vision, then my vocation becomes my vision rather than a response to God’s ongoing call. For example, I started my vocation journey as a diocesan seminarian, but eventually recognized that I was called to religious life as an Oblate missionary. Studying with and developing friendships with Oblates led me to a different understanding of God’s call for me and helped me to see that this was not an abandoning of my vocation but a deeper and truer response to God’s invitation.

As we contemplate the gospel story of the Canaanite woman, we are invited to open our hearts and minds to the ongoing call of God in our lives and to an openness to see life and vocation differently than we do presently and to a willingness to respond in new ways. Like a road we choose to walk along might have unexpected turns and corners, so it is with God’s invitation. We start along the journey and ‘behold’ there is an unexpected nuance to the call. When we walk along the road to which God calls us, there can and will be unexpected and awesome surprises.

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