

August 20, 2017    Immaculate Conception, Hartford    11:00 a.m.

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time/Annual Diocesan Fiesta

Once again, welcome to one and all!

This Annual Diocesan Fiesta is such a joyful and happy event—and I look forward to it every year. It's great to celebrate this Holy Mass outdoors, surrounded by the beauty of God's creation, in the midst of all the vegetables, fruits and flowers that are in full growth and bloom, the result of a lot of backbreaking work and very long days in the fields. On this very beautiful day, we are blessed to be with one another, celebrating God's Love and Mercy for us all.

When we are in God's Presence, as St. Paul teaches us, in spite of those differences we might experience in where we come from, our life circumstances, or even what language we speak, in God's sight—we are all equally valued and loved; there are no distinctions. God loves us all the same.

Today's Gospel passage that we just heard made that point very strongly. St. Matthew told us at the beginning of that passage that Jesus had walked from his own home area and went into some "foreign" territory—the territory of the pagans—in Tyre and Sidon. And right away, a Caananite woman came up to Him to make a bold request. First of all, in social practices of Jesus' day, women did not approach men—they didn't even associate with them. Women would stay in one group and men in another. And this woman was not even Jewish—she was a pagan who didn't believe in God, at least not as the Jewish people did. But this woman had a very strong motivation that caused her to ignore those social customs. She was a mother who loved her children. In particular this mother had a daughter who was, as St. Matthew told us, "being tormented by a demon". This woman was bound and determined to go anywhere and do anything to get help for her child.

We can all relate to that, right? We sacrifice ourselves in all kinds of ways to provide for our children; and if any one of them is in trouble, we'll go to any lengths to get them the help they need! And so she came to Jesus because she had heard people talking about

Him—everyone was saying that Jesus was "special", a "holy man of God". Even though there were many differences between her and Jesus, she felt a strong connection with Him because she was convinced that He could help her daughter.

Because of the woman's persistence—because of her deep concern for her daughter's well-being, which meant that she would not take "NO" for an answer—because of her amazing faith in Jesus (she even called Him "Son of David" and "Lord"),—because of all of those reasons, whatever "differences" there were between them were removed, and unity—connectedness—was the result.

Eventually Jesus gave into her constant pleas, not because she wore Him down, but because He could see the depth of her faith, and that's why He said to her: "O woman, great is your faith; let it be done for you (and your daughter) as you wish."

In God's Divine Plan from the very beginning of time, it is "unity" and "oneness" that God wants for ALL people.

In the First Reading today, we heard the Prophet Isaiah speaking on behalf of God and shouting out from the top of the mountain: "My house is a house of prayer for all people!" God's Plan was first directed to the Jews, but His Plan is intended for ALL the world—for all people, in all places, no matter what their race, language or any other differences.

The only condition that God places on people is what we heard Isaiah say in that reading—all people who hear God's Word are to "observe what is right, do what is just!" Very simple; very clear; and yet, many of us find even that simple condition of God difficult to carry out, and decide to make up our own rules, or want to do things "my way".

If we look around our world—even in our own life experiences—we will probably find lots of situations and circumstances where people are divided and separated from one another.

If we look among our own relationships, we might find occasions when we are separated from others because they are not of our race, or ethnic group, or nationality; maybe because they have different political opinions; maybe because they have different religious beliefs. Maybe we find reasons to feel alienated from others because of immigration issues, or what our legal status happens to be.

The woman in today's Gospel is a great Model for all of us. Whether she knew it or not, she believed within her very being that it wasn't right for those kinds of accidental differences between her and Jesus, such as that He was a man and she was a woman, or that He was Jewish and she was Syro-Phoenician—why should that make a difference, or keep us from living with one another the way God intended for us to live from the very beginning?!

Since God has created ALL people in His own image and likeness, there should be nothing that separates us from seeing one another as sisters and brothers in Christ, our “Lord and Savior”.

We are Catholics! Our Church is universal, headed by Christ Himself, and led in this world by the Vicar of Christ, Pope Francis. Our Church is a spiritual Home where ALL people, despite whatever differences might exist among us, can come together in worship because Jesus unites us in His redeeming/saving Love.

The Church is where we come to find God’s Love through the teachings of our Faith, and to be nourished and strengthened by the Sacraments.

Let us pray today that each of us may help to make God’s original plan of unity among ALL people a reality at least in our own lives. And let us hope that one day, we will hear Jesus pay each of us the same wonderful compliment that Jesus paid that unnamed woman:

“Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

God bless you, now and always!