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20th Sunday of Ordinary Time

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Listening for Revelation

All of today's readings show us that no one who honors God and ministers to God by performing works of mercy is a stranger to God. Could any parable be more timely in our world today where religions all over the world are pitted against one another, sometimes in fierce battle? How did we become a world so divided when science teaches us that beginning with the tiniest, most microscopic bit of life, we are all related because we all descend from that tiniest particle of life? Yet, over the millennia, we have divided ourselves by religion, by language, by customs. And nothing is wrong with that. These cultural divisions become wrong and unjust, though, when we privilege our religion, our language and our customs over others.

Jesus, we know, is God's revelation to us of what God wants all of us to be. St. Paul put it this way: "I live now, not I, but Christ lives in me." We are all given the vocation to let that tiny spark of divinity within each of us grow into a steady flame so that our very earthy, time-bound humanity can continually open to new depths of reality, to new depths of Divine Mystery.

Jesus grew up in a culture in which people knew that they were the chosen ones of God, chosen by God for a special mission. I asked a rabbi once what this meant. He told me that God had chosen the Jews to be witnesses to the One God. Then, I replied, "In today's world both Christians and Muslims also witness to one God." He replied: "That may be, but it was and still is the special mission of the Jews to witness to the One God even if others came to the same insight."

The Israelites didn't always believe that the God of Abraham was a universal God; they came to that belief through their human experience. In the beginning they had several gods; then, they came to the belief in one God, but that God was their God. Finally, because they experienced that wherever they went, God went with them – even into foreign lands, even into captivity, that their God was not only their God, but a universal God of all that is.

Notice that this revelation took place over time through their human experience that they reflected upon.

Jesus believed that he was called to restore Judaism to its original impulse, its prophetic charism to seek justice for all. That is where the Canaanite woman enters the story. This pagan woman asked Jesus to cure her daughter who was possessed by a demon. Jesus replied, No, he understood that he was called to help the lost sheep of the house of Israel. It wouldn't be right for him to minister to those outside of Israel. Then this mother, desperate to have her beloved daughter healed pleaded with Jesus, humiliating herself, saying that even dogs eat the crumbs under the table. She only wanted a crumb.

Jesus listened attentively to the woman, and came to agree with her. He realized, then, that his mission was larger than he had realized. Although not a Jew, the woman had faith that Jesus was a good man, a godly man. That was enough. Jesus cured her daughter. Jesus changed; he realized that his mission went beyond the boundaries set by Judaism. I've heard some people say that Jesus didn't change his mind, he was testing her. I think this opinion takes away from the very humanity of Jesus. Besides what person goes around setting up tests for others?

Jesus shows us that in interacting honestly with one another, change happens; revelation occurs. It is a grace to be able to really listen to another person, hear their words, watch their

expressions, their body language. That is why listening, really listening to another person, makes us vulnerable to the other. We may have to change our position on some matter. At the very least, we shall have changed because now, we understand another, even though we may not agree.

Jesus made himself vulnerable to a Canaanite, a non-believer. Jesus has shown us that to be human is to change and sometimes to change very often. Change is always a challenge and is never good for its own sake. Sometimes, we shouldn't change. How do we know when to change? I believe these are some of the signs that change is called for: we are opened to a larger world, a world that challenges our comfort level; we are nudged to embrace those of other origins, other languages, other colors, other ways of life, remembering our common beginnings; we are even asked to consider that Divine Mystery itself, bound neither by space or time, pulls us out of our present understanding of God to new ones, as St. Paul said, one veil after another is removed. We don't want to have the same understanding of God as we did as a child.

Jesus listened, and he responded. The woman pushed him, demanded and expected something from Jesus. She was praying. In our prayer, do we really anticipate a response? Do we engage Jesus in dialogue expecting an answer? So often, answers to prayers come in a change of mood, of understanding. Our hearts are changed.

What is true for ourselves is also true for our church and for our nation. There is certainly no listening going on in Washington although I am sure that this very week-end many in Congress are hearing these same readings being read. Francis, our Pope may listen to the common people more than his predecessors, but do we feel our American bishops listen to the cries of their flock? Yet, many of them are proclaiming these same readings this week end.

In the end, I think these readings call for a willingness to listen attentively to the other, to listen to our life experiences, like the Israelites did, to know that change happens: revelation occurs in the space of our interactions with one another and with God.

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