

20th Sunday Ordinary Time-Cycle A (August 14, 2011)

A couple of years ago I visited Rome and found myself in the Jewish Ghetto. The word "ghetto" comes from the Italian and was first used to point to an enclosed community of Jews in Venice, people who were forced to live within confined "walls" to separate them from the larger population of Christians. I walked through this ancient area of Rome and tried to imagine being forced by Church leaders, including the Pope, to live within the confines of this defined area.

In the second reading from the letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of his love of the Jews who were first called by God to be the Chosen People. He says that their acceptance of the gospel is nothing less than "life from the dead." If only our Church had listened to the words of St. Paul who deeply loved his Jewish people. Instead, the church decided to label the Jews as "Christ killers," and led the way of centuries of abuse, segregation and even killing. It wasn't until the Second Vatican Council that the Church after nearly 2,000 years of persecution declared that it was immoral to segregate the Jews, let alone persecute them.

Can you imagine how different history would have turned out if we had not only listened to the words of St. Paul in Romans, but would have taken into account the scene in today's gospel of Jesus in His encounter with the Canaanite woman: a woman *and* Canaanite, the worst of enemies to the Jews. In the dialogue, the woman provoked Jesus into changing His mind about reaching out to those *outside*, the "lost sheep of the house of Israel." Further, Jesus declares that He cannot give the food of the sons and daughters to the "dogs," those who are outside. The woman challenges Jesus by acknowledging that even "dogs" eat from the crumbs of the table.

The walls came crumbling down in this exchange between the Canaanite woman and Jesus: gender and nation and religion. He saw in this woman a woman of faith, beyond the barriers that life sometimes imposes. Jesus wants us to see beyond the barriers that divide the human family, to embrace the vision of Isaiah, "the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, loving the name of the lord and ministering to him," empowering us to see beyond division to what unifies us: love.

At the turn of the century, Pope John Paul II apologized to the world over the sins that the Catholic Church has committed against humanity and one of the areas that he explicitly mentioned was the Church's tragic treatment of the Jews over nearly 2,000 years of history. Peace will never come if we do not let go of the need to "scapegoat" people based on pre-conceived ideas about religion and background. As a parish community, we need to see where the barriers exist, creating "ghettos," and embrace and live the desire of St. Paul and Isaiah to reach beyond our own to the "outsider or foreigner" and see ourselves in their plight.

One day the table of the Eucharist will embrace and not divide the human family into those who belong and those who don't...to the insider and those who are outside. We have a lot of work to do in being a Catholic community of peace and reconciliation, embracing what unites rather than what divides.