

**Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Cycle A**  
**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception – August 20, 2017**  
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Making its Broadway debut in 1934, “Anything Goes,” with music and lyrics by the great Cole Porter, poked fun at the changing morays of the time. In the title song, the character Reno Sweeney sings – “In olden days a glimpse of stocking was looked on as something shocking, now heaven knows, anything goes. Good authors too who once knew better words now only use four letter words writing prose – anything goes.” I suppose that theatre-goers in 1930s America, at the height of the Great Depression, seeing how the rich and powerful – those held up in society as people to be admired – now walked the same breadlines with everyone else, well, they truly must have felt that “The world has gone mad today, and good’s bad today, and black’s white today, and day’s night today,” as the song says. But if they really thought that the standards of their society were in such a steep decline, one shudders to imagine what they would think of the values of today. It is difficult to name a single standard of taste or morality that isn’t openly flaunted or completely disregarded in popular culture or on national television and certainly on the internet. Oh, we have made great strides in science and technology, but too often at the expense of faith and morals.

In some respects, that is why it is difficult for us to understand the background of today’s gospel – laden as it is with the moral standards and social conventions of the time. Jesus and his disciples had left Jewish Galilee and travelled north to the Gentile region of Phoenicia, to the cities of Tyre and Sidon which lie in present day Lebanon. The woman who calls out to Jesus is a native of this region – a Syro-Phoenician, as she is described in Mark’s gospel. But Matthew refers to her by the anachronistic title of “Canaanite” – hardly accurate by the political boundaries of the day – but an important distinction if you are trying to place her people in the context of Old Testament history. Here, Matthew tells us, is a pagan native of the Holy Land, someone who might have worshipped false gods – if she worshiped any god at all. Separated in such distinct groups, the society of Jesus’ day had standards governing behavior. Except when absolutely required, Jews did not speak to Gentiles and Gentiles did not speak to Jews. Furthermore, unless they were related or married, women and men kept their distance. So here was this Gentile woman calling out for help to a Jewish man – using a distinctly Judaic title, “Lord, Son of David.” Far from being cold and unfeeling, in making no response Jesus was obeying the social norms of his day. Yes, it was wrong of her to call out to him – but it would have been worse had he responded. His initial reply came to the disciples, who were asking him to send her away. “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” Jesus tells them. Remember that Jesus was getting a lot of heat from scribes and Pharisees that he and his followers were not strictly obeying the Mosaic laws – so Jesus’ first outreach was to Jews and only gradually to Gentiles as well. The woman, meanwhile, a mother desperate to find a cure for her daughter, was

not to be deterred. She fell at Jesus' feet and simply asked for his help. Well, now he could not ignore her – but his reply, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs,” strikes us as cruel and insensitive. Yet we are a people who often substitute political correctness for moral standards. We cannot apply twenty-first century linguistic sensitivity to a first century conversation. Jesus was not trying to be offensive – and the woman took no offense – indeed, she cleverly responded that even dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of their masters. Jesus was impressed. Great is your faith, he tells her. Only one other person in Matthew's gospel hears that declaration from Jesus – another Gentile, the Roman centurion who asked Jesus to cure his servant. The measure of a person – Jesus is implicitly telling us – is not their ethnic group or cultural tradition or race or language or wealth or power. The measure of a person – Jew or Gentile, woman or man – the measure of a person is the greatness of their faith, is the content of their character as Martin Luther King, Jr. described it.

That should be good news for us. Most of us have little Jewish blood. We should be grateful that the new covenant in Christ's blood embraces more than the originally chosen people of God. We should be grateful that Christ's love extends to us Gentiles as well. But his words should also challenge us. If we called out to Jesus today – if we asked him to cure someone we love – what would be Jesus' response? Would he say to us – “O woman, O man, great is your faith!” Or would he ask us – and who are you again? We may have met once, or even once a week, but it's been years since we've really talked. Yes, Jesus praised the faith of this Canaanite, this Gentile woman – but could he honestly praise our faith? What would we tell him, if he asked for our credentials? You say you have faith, he might say to us, but how do you live it out?

That's where we may be at a disadvantage. You see, if all we are able to claim is that we live out our faith in strict conformity to the moral standards of our time – well, the world has gone mad today, and good's bad today, and black's white today and day's night today. In this country, in this day and age, anything goes – but I suggest to you that heaven calls us to higher standards. If we truly want the Lord to look upon us as people of great faith – then we have to do better than the examples set for us by CBS and MTV and the White House and the Congress and the blogosphere and the Twitterverse. We will be measured by more than the number of our Instagram followers or Facebook friends. We will be measured by the depth of our faith, by our compassion, by how merciful we are. Jesus looked beyond the conventions of his time to see in that Canaanite woman a person of great faith. Do we look beyond our racial and ethnic stereotypes? Do we accept everyone based upon the content of their character, the greatness of their faith? There is the challenge of our time. Are we prepared to reject the praise our society heaps upon sin and instead look for faith and morals? Are we prepared to accept people regardless of their nationality or ethnicity or social standing? Are we prepared both to profess our faith in God and to live out that faith in acts of mercy and compassion? In other words, do we want to be people of great faith – or are we content to live as though anything goes?