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Not long ago, a friend recounted a disconcerting experience he'd had during the kiss of peace. When he extended his hand to a woman next to him, she gushed, "I'm a hugger!" and before he knew what was happening, she embraced him in a full bear hug. He felt uncomfortable and somewhat disrespected. Consciously or not, the woman had ignored his preferences and imposed her way of doing things on him.

Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

[August 16, 2026](#)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-7

Psalm 67

Romans 11:13-15, 29-32

Matthew 15:21-28

Every culture teaches the "right" way to do things and to relate to others. Some universities provide their international students with descriptions of the U.S. culture to help them understand the people and situations around them. The U.S. cultural attitudes and behaviors they describe might [include](#) such things as individualism, informality, punctuality, directness and equality. With their positive and negative effects, these characteristics offer a good introduction to aspects of the dominant U.S. culture — even as they disregard the diversity of cultures that make up our population.

This kind of explanation teaches that some degree of cultural exclusivity, some sense of "we're right," marks every human group, beginning with family and extending to ethnic or regional groups, nations and churches. It also suggests we can move beyond our limitations if we choose to recognize and respect others for who they are.

Isaiah, writing at a time when the chosen people were in exile, spoke in God's name promising that salvation was just around the corner. He explained that it happens when God's people act justly in all their relationships. He went on with the astounding announcement that God's favors would apply to gentiles as well as to themselves. Salvation is a universal offer. As Pope Francis would say, salvation is for todos, todos, ¡TODOS!

This leads into today's Gospel story. For some reason, Jesus had traveled beyond the borders of Jewish territory. Was he hiding? Seeking the "lost sheep of Israel"? Or was he drawn by the same spirit that impelled him to spend time in the desert? We don't know.

What we do know is that a gentile woman was determined to get his attention and that he wasn't ready to give it to her. Explaining his attitude, Jesus told the disciples that his mission was to the Jews, the chosen people.

Hearing that, the audacious woman simply did him homage. Disregarding what he said, she expressed reverence for him in a way that demonstrated her faith in him. Kneeling before him implied that she recognized his authority—even as she demanded attention to her need.

He had to respond. That started the famous dialogue in which he told her that it's not right to give the family's food to dogs. Echoing the centurion (Matthew 8:8) who told Jesus, "I am not worthy. Say but the word ...," she retorted that just the scraps would suffice to fulfill her need.

Jesus enjoyed debates, and this simple woman's reply and expression of faith must have delighted him. What's more, her insistence called him—and his disciples—to broaden his vision of his mission. Her tenacious faith undermined any focus restricted to Israel. So, he said, "Let it be done." With this, the pagan woman of faith became one of the only two Gospel characters who got Jesus to change his mind. (Mary at Cana was the other.)

Matthew wrote this disturbing story showcasing Jesus' openness over his godliness. It highlights Jesus' humble willingness to learn—and urges his disciples to learn greater inclusivity—a challenge for Jewish Christians when gentiles were joining them. When we combine this with Isaiah and Paul's message about preaching the faith to gentiles, we can see that our world continues to face the same challenge.

Today's readings call us to enlarge our hearts and souls. First, we need to recognize our prejudices, the judgments we make about others, and our certainty that our way is the only—or even the best—right way to eat, work, play, pray and relate to one another. There's no human group whose members don't need to learn to get over themselves.

Back to my friend in the pew. The woman who embraced him may have thought she was following the command, "Do unto others ... " But she treated him like she wanted to be treated. Assuming that her way was right, she remained incurious about his preferences and uniqueness.

Our first sisters and brothers in the faith had to choose to become an inclusive community. (See Acts 15.) In loving others, they realized when they dropped their narrow expectations, they could cultivate open hearts and become a community capable of embracing all of God's people.

Following Jesus, we can all do the same.

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