

20 Sunday A

August 16, 2020

St. Patrick

Shortly Anna Champion will sing the African-American spiritual, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand.”

In today’s Gospel Jesus didn’t take the hand of the woman who came to him, pleading for help. In fact, the Gospel tells us, Jesus **“did not answer her at all.”** Jesus said nothing to her.

And his disciples shrugged her off further: **“Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us!”**

Yes, she was outside the circle, marginalized for three reasons:

--a *woman*, alone in a man’s world;

--a gentile, not Jewish, not part of the chosen people. Jesus put it bluntly, **“I was sent *only* to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”**

--and, finally, her daughter was **“*tormented by a demon.*”** That’s the way the Gospel put it. In these days, she might have been stigmatized with the label of “mental illness.”

Outside the circle, on the margins. But, by the end of today’s Gospel: Who won? Who bested whom?

She bested Jesus and got into the circle. **“Woman, great is your faith!”** Last Sunday, you may remember, Jesus said Peter had **“little faith.”** In all of St. Matthew’s Gospel, it’s only here that he says someone has **“great faith.”**

Sister Thea Bowman “was one of the great treasures of the American Catholic Church” (1). She also had **“great faith.”** She’s buried two miles from here at Elmwood Cemetery. An African-American born in 1937 as Bertha Bowman in the bowels of the state of Mississippi, Sister Thea Bowman was clearly marginalized. She only became Catholic when her parents, neither of whom was Catholic, sent her to a Catholic school to get the best education possible. At the age of 10, she was baptized. Then, she went to a new school founded by the Franciscan Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. There, she became mesmerized with learning and, a shock to her parents, she found her vocation. She left Canton, Mississippi, at the age of 16,

in order to become a nun. She moved to the motherhouse in Wisconsin—from Mississippi to Wisconsin! And Bertha took the name Thea, “of God,” and was the only sister of color in the whole community of white faces. An outsider indeed!

The woman in the Gospel had resolute, invincible persistence. She didn’t want to “blend in”; no, she wanted *in*. So did Sister Thea Bowman. She didn’t “blend in” among her nuns. And, she became a leading voice of showing a black way of being Catholic. She wove her people’s history of slavery and oppression, the tradition of spirituals, celebration and remembrance—in her teaching and life and worship.

After earning a doctorate in English, Sister Thea Bowman showed herself as a spellbinding speaker. She made sure her talks and lectures had the atmosphere of a revival. On two occasions Sister Thea came to St. Patrick’s and spoke with the parish.

The last six years of her life, Sister Thea struggled with cancer. She kept on teaching, singing, and living. As she once put it: “I try each day to see God’s will...I console myself with the old Negro spiritual: “Sooner will be done the troubles of this world. I’m going home to live with God” (2).

A year before her death, in a wheelchair, wearing her colorful African robes, she was invited to speak before the entire assembly of U.S. Catholic bishops at their annual meeting in 1989. Sister Thea preached before them, showed the joy of her faith, and got them singing with her a rendition of black spirituals.

At the start of today’s Gospel from St. Matthew, Jesus said that his focus was *only* the Jewish people. At the very end of that Gospel, the Risen Jesus told the apostles: “**Go make disciples of all the nations...!**” That Canaanite woman got Jesus to open the door much wider. So did Sister Thea Bowman within the church, the Lord anointing her with the “balm of Gilead.” On her tombstone at Elmwood, she buried next to her parents, the simple epithet engraved below her name says, “She tried.” So did the Canaanite woman.

“Great is your faith!” With our *little* faith, may we try as well.

- (1) Robert Ellsberg, "Sister Thea Bowman," in All Saints: Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets, and Witnesses for Our Time (New York: A Crossroad Book, 2001) pg. 142. I have turned to Ellsberg for highlights of her life.
- (2) Ibid., pg. 144.

General Intercessions

August 16, 2020

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Break down walls of separation within the church and society, thus uniting people of every race, tongue and culture in their love of you and reverence for one another; we pray to you, O Lord—

Bless all students as they begin this new school year, that the Spirit of God may grant them the gifts of wisdom and understanding; we pray to you, O Lord—

Strengthen with passion and with health all teachers, that they may share their knowledge with patience and care for their students; we pray to you, O Lord—

Guide parents, the first teachers of their children, that their faith and love may be an example within their home; we pray to you, O Lord—

Bless Bishop-elect Robert Marshall of Memphis as he is ordained Bishop of Alexandria, Louisiana, this week; we pray to you, O Lord—

Protect all in the military, as well as firefighters, police personnel, and first responders; we pray to you, O Lord—

Grant eternal life to those who have died with their hope fixed on you, especially Deacon Dan Brown, Jim Moore, and those who have died from Covid-19; we pray to you, O Lord—

