

Ed Wosinski, our youth and family director, told me something awful the other day: last Sunday somebody sat in his pew. It's hard to fathom, but they traversed on his sacred space. Can you imagine? Change comes oh so hard for some of us. It comes hard for me, too. Every time I go to the gym I secure the same locker, and I find myself perturbed when someone else has the nerve to take *my* locker.

Change: who wants it? Well, I afraid to say, the Bible does. Rob Bell in his new book **What is the Bible**--the book that will be a resource for the first adult Sunday School class in September—claims that what is so powerful about so much of the Bible is the disruption that it brings to the way we think and see. What is so powerful about the Bible is that it has the ability to change us dramatically.

Some people as they think about the Bible view it as a unified document that has total agreement within itself. Nothing is further from the truth. The Bible is a very dynamic book that embraces great diversity of thought, that sometimes even operates with contradictory thought. The Bible disagrees with itself sometimes. The Bible transforms the Bible sometimes. The Bible changes.

We see that today in this marvelous reading from the third section of Isaiah. After God commands the people of Israel to “maintain justice and do what is right” since his way of doing things/his deliverance is about to arrive, he speaks about eunuchs and foreigners as being welcome in the temple and the community of Israel. Now if you know the Bible, you know that elsewhere it is said that these folks are not. Men who were castrated and thus not able to produce male reproductive fluids weren't welcomed in the temple. They were thought to be particularly unclean. Somebody had messed with the mysterious powers of life and death that were thought to be in the fluids and thus turned eunuchs into unwelcomed people, damaged goods.

In other words, the sexually different weren't welcome. But now, God in Isaiah says, they are welcome. "To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters." They are going to have a great status now in the temple. It won't be about the fact that they cannot produce kids, that they are marred somehow. They will be welcomed and valued not because they are marred, but because they live out of trust in God. Interesting how the Bible changes!

And the same kind of change occurs in relationship to foreigners. Elsewhere in the Bible we are told that foreigners aren't welcome in the holy places of Israel. But God in Isaiah today says, "And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer." It isn't about national or ethnic background anymore. That is no longer the most important thing. All folks who cling to the story of the God who rescues his people and who calls them into a covenant relationship with him—they all are welcome. It isn't about their label. It isn't about the boxes that we place them in or like to live in ourselves.

Those little boxes, those labels are useful for *us*, especially when we need something to prop up our fragile egos. You got to get this. The notion of white supremacy is not only a matter of sinful pride; it also is a matter of sinful insecurity. The only way I can feel better about myself is to tear other people down? The only way I can know who I am is to know who I am not? God in Isaiah says, "It's a new day," a new day for defining who we are. Foreigners are welcome. The community is not defined by the old categories of us and them, categories that too often are a matter of pride or insecurity. The Bible changes.

And in case you didn't notice, Jesus also changes. In what I think is one of the best stories in all the Bible, Matthew tells us about the radical transformation that occurs in Jesus. Matthew in today's reading says that Jesus enters Tyre and Sidon, cities where foreigners lived. While there, we are told, he encounters a Canaanite woman. Now at

the time Matthew was writing, Canaanites didn't really exist. I think Matthew has chosen to label this woman a Canaanite to underscore what an outcast she is. She not only is a woman and a foreigner; she is connected to an ancient enemy of Israel. Old grudges die hard. This woman comes to Jesus and says, "Kyrie Eleison, Lord, have mercy on me; my daughter has a demon." In addressing him she calls him "Son of David," giving a full nod to his Jewishness.

Well, Matthew indicates, "Jesus did not answer her at all." In some ways, that makes sense. In a shame-based culture like that of the one in which Jesus lived, to speak to her, *a woman*, is to admit that she can make some kind of claim on him. He doesn't want to do that. Nor do his disciples want to do that. They urge him saying: "Send her away; she's really getting on our nerves."

And then, as if to fulfill the disciples' desire, Jesus tells the Canaanite woman: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. I wasn't sent to foreigners. I was sent to my people, the lost people of my people."

But this tenacious woman does not give up. Kneeling before him, she continually begs at his feet: "Help me, I've got big-time problems."

Yet Jesus still won't respond. Using an ethnic slur, he says, "It's not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs. I've been sent to my own people. I can't give you lowly people the good stuff that is intended for *my* people."

But the woman won't let go. She's like a dog on a bone!! "I get it, Lord," she says, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table. You may be maligning me and my people, but I'll play your game because you have something that I want."

Then Jesus says, "Wow! Your faith is over the top. What you want is what you get." At that point, the woman's daughter was healed.

And I want to say, so was Jesus. This foreign woman, this enemy of Israel changed Jesus. We are going to see in the Gospel of Matthew now that Jesus' mission is becoming larger, expanding to the point that it includes the whole world. At the end of Matthew, the raised Jesus,

standing on a mountain, commissions his disciples to go into the *whole world*, baptizing, teaching, and making disciples. The mission of Jesus and of the church is not just to our kind, but to *all* nations. It's as if Jesus knew—and I am sure he did—the promise of God in Isaiah: “My house shall be called a house of prayer for *all* people.”

Jesus changed! A woman, a foreigner, an enemy of Israel, an outcast changed Jesus. Now note this: the change that I have been describing—change in the Bible and change in Jesus—was change in the direction of more compassion and love. That's always the way it is in the story of our God. The change we are talking about is change that makes the world bigger to us, not smaller. It is a change that widens the world, not narrows it down. It is change that expands hearts, minds, and tables. It is change that moves us to more compassion, more love, more forgiveness, more grace. That is the change characteristic of our God.

You know, the Bible tells us on many occasions that God repented, changed his mind regarding the evil that he was going to impose on people. The story about Noah and the flood is a remarkable story about a God who changes his mind. The story indicates that God is really ticked off at the situation in the world, and thus decides to flood the world, saving a remnant because, well, he can't destroy everything. After the flood, we are told that in some ways God regretted what he did. “Never again will I do this,” he claims. Never again will he try to destroy the whole world. And the rainbow in the sky will be a sign of his commitment to this “never-again,” his commitment to all things and all people. When God changes God's mind in the Bible it is always in the direction of more compassion, more love for all people and all things.

Come on, people! Not all change is good, I recognize that. But to catch up with God, to catch up with what the Bible is ultimately about, to catch up with the Jesus who is transformed by an outcast, is to give into being changed, from the inside out. It is to allow compassion to

move you further into compassion. It is to allow love to move you further into love.

There is enough hatred in this world right now. There is enough violence. There is enough racism, Nazism, xenophobia, fear of the other. There is enough pride and enough insecurity. But there isn't enough compassion.

Ed, you might have to give up your pew! White people who think you are the only game in town, you might have to let go of some of your privilege. People who have been left out, you who have been punched by life and other people, you might need to not allow what has been told you about you to define your lives. As God proclaims in Isaiah today: "Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, 'The Lord will surely separate me from his people;' and do not let the eunuch say, 'I am just a dry tree.'" In God, you are not a dry tree. In God, you are not separated from his people. In God, you have worth. In God, you have status.

In God, it is all about compassion. So, give in and let yourself be changed!