

Don't judge a book by its cover. It's one of those sayings that is engrained in people from childhood. Don't judge a book by its cover. In the narrowest sense of the expression, don't judge something by its outward appearance alone. Just as a book may be a work of literary genius wrapped in a ugly, dingy binding, so also many things in life are more valuable than they seem on the outside.

Moving to several small towns in my life, I've often found this to be true. Because small towns like Salem, Illinois and Onaway, Michigan and Boonville, Missouri are full of hidden treasures. Restaurants that look like nothing from the outside, but are filled with charm and amazing food. Natural wonders that don't even show up on a map, but absolutely take your breath away. Big cities are full of outward glitz and glamour, but small towns are a book that you should never judge by its cover.

This happens with people too. No, we shouldn't show prejudice or judgement. When it comes to people, many times, "don't judge a book by its cover" could be even better said, "don't judge... lest ye be judged." And yet, it happens.

In our Epistle, for example, James discusses how we do it with the rich and the poor. Someone wearing fine clothes comes into church, and we automatically treat him better. Give him more attention. Someone with shabby clothes walks in and we jump to all sorts of conclusions about him. Or just ignore him altogether. Even though the rich man may have no compassion or generosity in his heart at all and the poor man may be absolutely overflowing in faith and love.

We have our preconceived notions about people and, try as we might, it does affect how we treat them. This was no less true in Jesus' ministry as well. You see, Palestine had some very distinct regions with some strong stereotypes associated with them.

There was Judea in the southern part of Israel, the region of Jerusalem and Bethlehem and all the "good Jews". Up on the north end of Israel was Galilee, with cities like Nazareth and Capernaum. This was still firmly Jewish land, but kind of a backwater country with second-class Jews. Between them was Samaria, a land that had once been a part of Israel, but had sold out to foreign rulers and was now despised by most Jews.

Then, finally, far to the north, above Galilee, was Syria and Phoenicia, the area we would now call Lebanon. This wasn't Jewish land. This had never been Jewish land. And despite huge amounts of commerce and civilization and culture, as far as Israel was concerned, this was heathen wilderness. The Samaritans may have been despised and hated, but at least they were people. The Syro-Phoenicians didn't even get that much respect.

And yet, this is where Jesus goes. Why? We don't really know for sure. It obviously wasn't for evangelism, because Jesus immediately hides in a house. Doesn't tell a single person that He's there.

The best that we can gather, Jesus just needed a vacation. And by this point in his ministry every single Jew in Galilee and Judea and even a fair number of Samaritans knew His name and face. So the only way to get some peace was to leave Israel altogether.

But even here, Jesus can't get away from His reputation. Even here, a woman with a sick daughter had heard of Jesus. So she tracks him down, she pounds on His door, she begs to be let in. And finally, Jesus relents.

But I gotta think that the man she finds is not the man she was expecting. Because after she pleads her case to Him, Jesus responds in a way nobody could have guessed. He insults her. And not just a minor, halfhearted insult. He called her a wild dog. Inhuman. Diseased. Filthy. The type of creature that a Jew couldn't even be near because it would defile them in God's eyes.

Now, there are a couple different ways that she could have responded to this. She could have been humiliated. This was, after all, how Jews always treated her. She had gone and put herself out there, been completely vulnerable, and then been stabbed in the heart. Or, she could have been angry. After all, He was the outsider. He was in her country. She should have been calling Him all sorts of foul names.

But the woman doesn't respond either way. She doesn't get embarrassed. She doesn't get angry. Instead, she agrees with Him. She acknowledges that she is a dog in God's eyes. But that He is still her Lord. And He is still the only one who can help her.

This was probably a shocking scene even in Jesus' day, but I have to think it would be even more stunning today. We're Americans, after all. Our country was founded on the principle of equality. Our culture is laced with this idea of inalienable rights.

The very holiday we celebrate this weekend is about rights. The right to organized labor. The right to healthy working conditions and a fair wage. The right to be represented in business and government by someone looking out for your best interests. These are good rights. They are important to our country. They are valuable to our nation. But make no mistake about it, they do not apply to God.

We have no rights before God. God has no obligations to us. He is not our President or our boss. He is our creator. Or maybe a better way to describe it: He is our manufacturer. That's how both Isaiah and St Paul put it. God is a potter and we are pots, to be made, used, and – if he chooses – destroyed.

And the sad part is, we aren't even very good pots. We're pots with cracks and impurities and deformities. We're pots that any reasonable potter would smash and throw in the fire rather than try and make them usable.

But that's what makes Jesus' response to the woman so incredible. He is her Lord. He is her creator. Her manufacturer. She has no rights before Him. He has no obligation to help her. And yet He has compassion on her. He may have called her a dog, but that isn't really how he sees her. Nor does he see her as a broken pot or the ugly cover to her book.

He sees her as a frightened mother. And a humble follower. He sees her as the child of God that He had always created her to be. And despite the place that she lives and all the stereotypes that surround it, He sees her as part of His chosen people. Not by birth or ethnicity or ritual, but by adoption and by faith.

You see, somewhere along the line, there was a new book put inside that ugly cover. Somewhere along the line, that woman heard Jesus preach and saw the miracles that He did. Somewhere along the line, the Holy Spirit worked in her heart. And made her more than a Syrian Phoenician. He made her one of God's People. Not an Israelite. Not a Jew. But a Christian. One of the very first.

Before the word Christian even existed, this woman believed that Jesus was the Christ. And for that reason, she had hope. Even in the midst of trial and heartache. Even in the midst of persecution and scorn. Even when it look like God himself had turned her away. She believed. And for that reason, her prayer was heard.

That's what it means to be a child of God. It means that even though we come to God with dirty covers, He sees past the cover and looks at the new creation on the inside. And that's the same thing that Isaiah tells us in our Old Testament lesson.

We come to God with anxiety and doubt, he makes us strong and fearless. We come to God spiritually blind, he opens our eyes so that we may see. We come to God spiritually lame, he makes us leap like a deer and ready to run into all the world with the good news. We come to God spiritually mute, he makes us sing for joy with God's praises. We come to God a wilderness of sin, a desert devoid of life, and he makes within a spring of living water so that we will never be thirsty again.

We come to God as people with no right to ask for His help. As mangy dogs and defective pots and filthy covers, ruined by sin, but God makes us part of His family. Not because it's our right. But because it's our privilege.

We are privileged to be called sons and daughters of God by Holy Baptism. We are privileged to come before our Lord in prayer and receive his Body and Blood for the forgiveness of our sins. We are privileged to call ourselves Christians and to be among those who can say, "Jesus is the Christ. He has come and He has saved me." Amen.