

Have you ever noticed how people from Kansas City, Missouri are so proud of being from Missouri? If we travel outside this region, it's very common to have a conversation go like this: "Where are you from?" "Kansas City." "Really? How are things in Kansas?" Then, fury arises out of the blue as once again we have to instruct another geography class dropout about the basics of middle America. There is a Kansas City, Kansas, but we're not from there. We may in a weak moment sheepishly admit we have acquaintances on the other side, but that's it.

People get clubby. We identify with people who are like us, we get comfortable with clubs. It's good and bad; it's good to have people who urge us on to grow, it's bad if we get so comfortable with our group that we start to exclude others. You know those feelings of exclusion--they start when as children our friends won't let us play with them. They come again when a major credit card company rejects our application. Exclusion is at the basis of racism and sexism. People get comfortable with their group, but then they hold others at bay.

Can it be possible that Jesus, our hero, was clubby? Yes, it's surprising to say, he was. His club was Israel. Fair enough, he was Jewish. He told the woman from Canaan he would not heal her daughter, she was not part of the club. What could she do? She had a different nationality, she couldn't just become an Israelite, she was excluded. She asked for a healing in spite of who she was, and Jesus consented. He bent the rules, and healed a Gentile. It wasn't the first time, incidentally--earlier in Matthew's Gospel he healed the son of a centurion, another Gentile. Jesus knew the limitations of his club, he also exceeded them.

It's a wonderful story, we can cheer the woman and breathe a sigh of relief when Jesus finally gives in. Yeah, that's the Jesus we know, that's the Jesus we want to be like. We want to exceed the limitations that our groups place on us. We want to be free and welcoming to others.

Sometimes it's hard because our groups are so much a part of us we don't recognize the limitations they demand. Sometimes it's hard because we're not good at reaching out to strangers. And maybe Jesus wasn't either, in this Gospel he doesn't take the initiative, he gives in to the woman's persistence. But if he wasn't good at making the first move he was good at responding to someone's present need.

How easy it is to stay safe inside our groups, to condemn foreigners, gays, the unemployed. How easy it is to stay safe inside ourselves, to ignore the people in the street, in the elevator, in the pew. Our groups give us limitations, they tempt us to exclude people from them. But to reach out to those who do not belong to us, to reach out to those we prefer to ignore, to reach to those we just don't agree with is to reach with the grasp of Christ.