

FEBRUARY 12, 2026 DEACON MIKE WALSH

I heard this story.

There was a woman. She was very excited to go on this trip to Ireland. She had always wanted to go to Ireland. And so she got off the plane, and the very first Irish person she met, she went up to and said to them, “Are you Catholic or Protestant?”

Now, the person was a little taken aback by that, and he said, “Well, actually, I’m an atheist.” The woman herself was taken aback by that answer. So she thought about it, looked at him, and said, “Okay. Well, are you a Catholic atheist, or a Protestant atheist?”

That does not make any sense on its own, does it? But it is a way to set up today’s Gospel reading, I think. This ability, or this need we might have, to put people into different categories.

But before we dive into the Gospel, a little bit of context. Where are we in Jesus’ ministry so far?

When we arrive at today’s reading, you will see it is at a turning point. We have had the baptism of the Lord. Jesus goes into the desert and then starts his public ministry, where he has been really growing in popularity and noticeability. He has been preaching, feeding the crowds, and casting out demons.

And he has been coming into increasing conflict with the religious leaders, especially over things like purity laws, which we heard about in yesterday’s Gospel. Saying that what you eat is not a big deal, that it is what comes from within that causes impurity, would have really caused discomfort to the religious leaders of the time. It would have challenged long-standing religious traditions.

So why does he go to this different place, to Tyre and Sidon? Some scholars say that at this particular point he is actually withdrawing a little bit. He is going to take some time to refresh himself, to go to this Gentile territory where maybe he is not as well known.

He enters the house, and as you see right at the beginning, he does not want anyone to know that he is there. That suggests that he is there for rest, maybe even as a time of transition in his ministry, as he reaches out to this new group of people.

And yet, even in this retreat, this time where he wants to have time to himself, he cannot escape. Faith seeks him out.

I told you that story at the beginning because you can see it is actually the same thing going on in our Lord's time. I am Irish, and I do not know if you know much about Irish history, but apparently the Protestants and the Catholics did not get along all that well.

If you want the quick way to sum up Irish history, it is three words: It is complicated. But there were generations of mistrust, of fear, of violence, and compassion very rarely would cross across this divide that had been created. To help someone on the other side would have been almost unheard of.

And really, in our Lord's time, it was the same way. The Gentiles and the Jews. The Jews understood themselves to be God's chosen people. They saw the Gentiles as outsiders, perhaps even religiously unclean, and there was this long history of separation.

So Jesus' words in this Gospel, which may be a little striking to us, about the dogs and feeding the dogs, would have made complete sense to those who were following him. Yes, they would say, you must be focused on the Jewish people.

But here is the turning point in the story. It is the reaction of the woman. The reaction of the woman on hearing this is that she does not get into an argument with Jesus. She does not demand that Jesus take her seriously and help her daughter.

No, she responds with great humility, courage, and, I think most importantly, with trust. And you see, Jesus uses this as an example, and he allows her faith to cross this centuries-old boundary. And the story proves that God's mercy is much larger than any line that we choose to draw.

A modern-day example of that comes from a book called *Tattoos on the Heart*, written by Father Greg Boyle. He is a Jesuit priest. And if you live in the United States, or certainly in Los Angeles, you know his work. He has a ministry called Homeboy Industries, where he ministers to former gang members.

They have created this space where gang members who want to leave that lifestyle can come and work with people who used to be their rivals.

He tells in the book the story of Benito. I do not have time to go into the whole story, but he was a very young man, twelve years old, and he had endeared himself to Father Greg and everyone else.

One day he is at home, playing outside. There are gang members there, up against the garbage cans, and another group comes, opens the door of the van, and fires off shots. Benito is struck. And he is struck with such a large-caliber weapon that the doctor said his spine was severed by the vibrations. And he dies.

Father Greg writes about how he felt in that moment, as he sat vigil with Benito's family and watched him die. He says:

“If we long to be in the world who God is, then somehow our compassion has to find its way to vastness. It would rather not rest on the two in the van who are firing alarmingly large-caliber weaponry. I am sure it didn’t. When they were caught, it turns out I knew them.”

Father Greg says it was excruciating not to be able to hate them. “Sheep without a shepherd, and no less the real deal than Benito. But for the lack of someone to reveal the truth to them, they had evaded healing, and the task of returning them to themselves got more hardened and difficult.”

And then he asks the hard question: “But are they any less worthy of compassion than Benito?”

Father Greg says that Jesus says, “If you love those who love you, big wow.” Jesus does not suggest that we cease to love those who love us when he nudges us to love our enemies. Nor does Jesus think that the harder thing is the better thing. He simply knows it is the harder thing.

And that is the point of our story today. It is the point of every Mass. Because at the end of Mass, Jesus gently nudges us to go out into the world in peace, glorifying the Lord by our lives.

And Jesus challenges us to do the harder thing: to practice boundary-breaking compassion, even when others may judge us harshly for loving those whom they consider to be our enemies.

God bless.