Today’s gospel reports a situation of prejudice. I would like to comment on the nature of prejudice, Jesus’ response to prejudice, and a personal experience which changed one of my prejudices.

A psychologist named Gordon Allport wrote in the 1950s a definitive book on the nature of prejudice. It is profoundly insightful into this universal and perennial human experience. In a nutshell, the author claims that numerous factors contribute to creating prejudice: on the one hand, centuries-long history; broad factors of culture including politics, economics, race, religion, and language; familial attitudes; and personal experiences. And on the other hand, exists an “earned reputation.” An example of prejudice is this: “the Irish drink too much whiskey.” The fact is that many Irish but not all Irish drink too much whiskey. Many prejudices can be reduced, on the one hand, to countless contributing factors being generalized; and on the other hand, an earned reputation developed by some individuals.

Jesus entered into an historical moment and location wherein his contemporaries despised the worshippers of Baal. Baal was a regional god of fertility, primarily of agriculture, whom people worshipped by participating in sacred sexual rituals which scholars of religion describe as temple prostitution. The Israelites referred to these people most disparagingly as “dogs” on account of their behaviors. The Baal-worshippers were descendants of the Philistines, Phoenicians, and Canaanites who lived in the seacoast cities of Tyre and Sidon, about 50 and 25 miles respectively south of Beirut. In today’s periscope, Jesus and his disciples were walking in the Baal-worshipping region of Tyre and Sidon. One of the local women, a Canaanite woman, rushed out from the crowd, and begged Jesus, “Have pity on me, Lord, Son of David! My daughter is tormented by a demon.” The disciples suggested Jesus dismiss her. Jesus seemed to ignore her. He said to his disciples, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” She kept begging, “Lord, help me.” Jesus replied, “It is not right to take the food of the children and throw it to the dogs.” These sound like harsh words coming from Jesus, whom we usually portray as “good and gentle Jesus, yes? She, however, was determined. She replied, “But even the dogs eat the scraps that fall from the table of the Master.” Jesus stopped. He praised her: “Woman, great is your faith.” And the gospel continues: “the daughter was healed from that hour.”

Jesus was a man of his times. He was “inculturated.” He lived in a certain cultural milieu. But Jesus looks beyond appearances. As the gospel of Luke observes, “Jesus sees the hearts of people.” (Lk. 16.15) We see Jesus’ vision demonstrated repeatedly in his parables about the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan woman at the well, and the Ten Lepers among whom the one grateful one was a Samaritan. Jesus continues his extolling of social outcasts by his interactions with the woman caught in adultery, the tax collector Zacchaeus, the Roman centurion whose servant Jesus healed. Simply, Jesus does not judge by appearances; “Jesus sees the hearts of people.”
Before I share with you an example of one of my previous prejudices, may I ask you to ponder, “what might be some of your prejudices?” ... Don’t be too hard on yourself, and don’t be too easy on yourself. Just be honest with yourself. Spirituality is rooted in personality. Personality is your deepest God-given reality. He has created you with a certain temperament, certain values, certain perspectives, certain preferences. He has made you good, but not perfect!!! Your spirituality resides within and is affected by your personality. Your spirituality can help to develop, moderate, and shape the expressions of your personality. Ask Jesus to help you to better see the hearts of people.

Long-story short! When I was a pastor in a rural parish in Maryland, one of our young soldiers died in Iraq. He was killed instantly from an IED blast. He was a West Point grad in engineering, took further training in Ranger School, called his mother on Mother’s Day, and one week later was killed. When his body was brought to town, about half of the town’s 2,000 people turned out for the funeral Mass. Also who came to town were about two dozen members of the Westboro Baptist Church. This group shouts hateful things and hold signs that proclaim, like, “We are happy your son was killed.” Also in town arrived about 300 bikers whose purpose was to form an Honor Guard to shield the family from hearing or seeing these hateful protesters. After Mass, we processed the one mile route to the cemetery without seeing or hearing any protesters. We saw and heard the bikers! My prejudice had been bikers. I was never attracted to their bandanas, tattoos, loud bikes, rough images. But my prejudice was eradicated that day. Now I pray for these rough-looking tough-looking bikers, and when I see them on the highway, I pray for their safety, and for the good they do at many of these military funerals.

What can you learn from Jesus’ examples? ... What can you learn from my mistakes? ... May I suggest that we might try to live more liked Jesus, i.e., that we more and more try to “see the hearts of people.”