

Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - A Proper 15 (2026)

Isaiah 56:1, 6-8

Psalm 67

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

‘Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, “Have mercy on me Lord, Son of David....” But he did not answer her at all....But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.”’ In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Not only does Jesus not answer her, but he also dismisses her very presence and responds directly to the disciples who just want to be rid of her, that his mission of salvation “was only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Undeterred, this desperate woman with a desperately ill daughter drew even closer to Jesus with the same words of pleading we heard Peter shout in last week’s story after falling into the Sea of Galilee, “Lord, help me.” Jesus retorts with some of the harshest words we hear in all the gospels from Jesus’ mouth, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Unwilling to give in, this outsider by reason of both gender and ethnicity responds even more eloquently, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.” What a stunning response born out of sheer desperation and an unending love for her daughter. Jesus then answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed instantly.

Many of us are more familiar with such harsh language and imagery from the Old Testament. We’re more familiar with the ‘God of wrath’ who brings forth death and destruction found in the stories of Noah’s Ark, Sodom and Gomorrah, the prophets of Baal who competed with God’s prophet Elijah, or the story of God directing Moses to order that the Levites kill some 3,000 of their Israelite brothers and sisters who participated in the worship of the golden calf in the wilderness. The prophets were notorious for the veracity of their language as they exhorted the people on God’s behalf. They were not ‘good ‘ol boys’; they spoke for God and the coming judgment or punishment for those who did not observe God’s ways.

Honestly, I think some of this wrathful language and imagery is why so many people have issues with the Old Testament; they much prefer the ‘Loving God’ portrayed in the New Testament.

That said, Jesus is no stranger to words of harsh rebuke. Remember when he calls the Pharisees a “Brood of vipers”? Or what of him calling various and sundry religious leaders ‘hypocrites,’ a description that seems rather tame by today’s standards given its massive overuse. How about his display of emotion and anger when he entered the temple court and saw what was taking place involving the money changers and the buying and selling of birds used in ritual sacrifice that resulted in him turning over their tables and not allowing anyone to bring anything through the temple?

As best as I was able to discern, Jesus saved these outbursts of language and action for those in authority, those who should have known better, those who took advantage of others, and those who thought themselves to be ‘worthy’ versus those deemed ‘unworthy.’ This is what makes today’s reading so jarring, so challenging. Jesus not only gives this desperate ‘outsider’ the cold shoulder, but when he does finally acknowledge and address her, he seems to have a canned answer that would suggest that she’s not ‘eligible’ for what he was offering to his targeted and preferred group, the ‘lost sheep of the house of Israel.’

So, what are we to make of this story? The usual commentaries and resources I use each week offered a variety of potential reasons for Jesus’ unbecoming and shocking behavior with this woman. Some suggest that he was just having a bad day. Others pointed to everything Jesus had been doing leading up to this encounter, such as feeding 5,000 and saving his friend Peter from sinking into the Sea of Galilee. He wanted and needed time away as he prepared for the final leg of his journey to Jerusalem, and all that entailed. Others offered this as a teaching on faith, a test of the woman’s faith for the benefit of the gathered disciples. None of these ‘potential explanations’ made sense to me, though the ‘faith’ angle had me doing a little more exploring. Ultimately, none of them ‘felt right.’ Whatever the rationale, this scene makes me, and I suspect you, uncomfortable because this is not the Jesus with whom we are accustomed. In contrast to Jesus’ reactions and words he used with the religious and secular leaders who served their

own interests, especially at the expense of others, this encounter involves a desperate woman at the end of her proverbial rope, and Jesus just does not shun the lost, the sick, the lame, the outcast, or the desperate. Why now?

I am not sure I have a definitive answer to my question, but a couple of ideas came to mind this week. One thought is that this story does have something to do with the woman's faith, and our faith as well, particularly in the face of indifference. How do we 'keep the faith' when it appears that our faith doesn't matter? The other holds up a mirror to my own actions in how I have or should respond to people who are desperate, or lonely, or find themselves on the outside-looking-in.

From the 'faith' perspective, this unyielding woman in desperate need of healing for her demon-possessed daughter finds in the person of Jesus the solution. She has a need to be addressed and is unwilling to take 'no' for an answer. I wonder, how many of us have gone to God in the same way, taken a request for mercy, healing, or guidance only to sense a resounding silence in response? How many times have our prayers gone unanswered, as if God has turned his face from us? How many times have we found ourselves begging for even the smallest bit of solace only to find that maybe we are unworthy of his grace and mercy? I suspect many of us have found ourselves in similar circumstances.

And yet, as people of faith, we continue to seek God's response. We continue to rely on his promises that he hears our prayers and knows our desires before we ask. We continue to trust in the God who said he would always be with us and never forsake us. Woody Allen is quoted as saying that "80% of success is showing up." We continue to 'show up' because that is what we're called to do, to pray and seek God's will and direction in our lives, hoping that our prayers align with his purpose for us. We need to go no further than Mother Teresa's conflicted relationship with God, whom she felt absent from most of her life, yet she willingly and with great dedication poured her life into the work she felt God had entrusted to her. We are to 'show up' even when we think God hasn't.

Finally, this story had me thinking about how I have experienced indifference from others and how I have shown indifference *to* others. The disciples wanted nothing to do with this Canaanite woman and wanted Jesus to get rid of her. Have you

ever felt like folks wanted to ‘get rid of you’ for not being a worthy member of the ‘insider’ group? Have people ever turned the other way when you appear on the scene? Have you ever been pushed aside amid incredible need or pain as if you really didn’t exist? If so, you know exactly what the Canaanite woman was feeling. Conversely, have you ever found yourself doing the exact same thing to someone else because you were either ‘too busy’ or you found him/her unworthy of your aid? We are created in the image of God, and as committed followers of his, we are to exemplify his characteristics of love, compassion, patience, generosity, and selflessness. I think this is why the story is so jarring: seeing Jesus act more like us than we like him *should* set us back on our heels and drive us to seek forgiveness. Who are we to withhold assistance from someone in need? Who are we to shun those whose situations we deem ‘bad’ or caused by ‘their own making’?

This beleaguered woman persisted, and Jesus responded. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” May we persist with the assurance that God listens and knows the inner workings of our hearts. May we resist the desire to keep others from experiencing relief and wholeness, assistance and compassion. May we hear in our hearts and minds the same divine response, “Great is *your* faith! Let it be done for *you* as you wish.”

