

The Rev. Canon Timothy Watt+
Year A Proper 15
Preached 20200916

Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32
Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

May I speak in the name of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy
Spirit. AMEN

I'm gonna let you in on a little secret. My wife, Tanya, is
smarter than me. Alright, it's not really a secret at all...

Over our marriage we've come to a détente that acknowledges
that while I am more read and know more discrete facts, the
clock rate on her processor quicker than mine. Sharp and fast. I
rely on book wisdom but she is well and truly gifted in both wit
and emotional intelligence... It's maddening at times but I am
actually very grateful to have such a wise, intelligent, and

strongly-willed woman in my life to challenge me on my assumptions... who can point me to experiences beyond my own and paint a picture of others' lives that I can grasp. Thank God for women such as these...

And like the woman in today's gospel, to whom we gentile believers owe a great debt.

Leading up to this point in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus has pointedly confronted the pharisees about their lack of mercy twice. In each debate Jesus calls upon them to forgo the mechanical and literal interpretation of the Torah, the law, to the mercy upon which it is all founded... the mercy of a God who seeks human flourishing and whom has called upon the

people of Israel to be the beacon of God's loving-kindness, drawing all nations to God, through Israel.

I want to be clear here. The pharisees were a very specific group within Judaism and must not be conflated to the entirety of Jewish belief. In fact, there was also wide variance of theological positions within the pharisaic movement itself. These debates are attempts to steer the narrative just like fundamentalist Christians do in the US... As Episcopalians, both Catholic and Reformed, we reject outright any claim of supremacy on the part of any branch of Christianity over the others. Anglicanism generally ascribes to Branch Theory, which acknowledges the many flavors of Christianity make up the totality of the one, Holy, catholic and apostolic church... But we also suspect we have the highest level of

tastefulness in the bunch... come on, that's funny... Regardless, Judaism has never really been monolithic in its theology just as Christianity has never truly been either. When Jesus debates pharisees, pretend it's like you having a theological discussion with your non-denominational brother-in-law... though probably Jesus is much more chill if you're anything like me in those discussions...

That aside, we know that Matthew's account of the gospel has Jesus calling on the pharisees to show mercy and then we have today's story where Jesus does not exactly come out smelling like roses in how he speaks with the Canaanite woman. So what gives? This is not the Jesus meek and mild that we want to love and follow... He has very nearly insinuated that this woman is a

female dog... think of the corresponding English word for that...
because that's what the original Greek here implies.

Here's the thing I think is happening... some biblical scholarship
backs this up and some debates it... but here's how I make
sense of it...

As Matthew's account unfolds we know that Jesus has already
taken certain groups to task for not showing mercy to those
within the fold of their own nation... And we know that several
of Jesus' own disciples have come to him from the ranks of the
pharisees and zealots. One can imagine Jesus overhearing the
debates around the evening fire after dinner about who is right
and what this can all mean within Israel... I imagine Jesus
remembering the story of Elijah and the gentile widow, living

outside of Israel, whose life God saved from famine through Elijah's miraculous work... though people starved in Israel.

Prophets don't go outside of Israel except to make a point through God's work among the gentiles... so Jesus is prophetically going to the same area as Elijah before him... and finds yet another widow there in desperation... Perhaps if his disciples can see God's largesse happening outside of the confines of the holy people, the debate about holiness within can be ended. God sent Elijah to find the widow and save her to shame the powers of Israel. This time God goes himself.

And that woman was wise and witty, sharp and persistent. The perfect partner for what Jesus has planned. Picture it with me...

For reasons the disciples do not understand, they have followed their rabbi out of the bounds of the holy places to the land of the gentile heathen. Their purity is put at risk... from the unkosher food to the pigs and dogs roaming the streets. What could have possessed Jesus to come here? Did they remember the prophets from before in whose footsteps they trod? Pressed into the difference by God?

Suddenly there is this Canaanite gentile woman running up to Jesus. The disciples nod to one another... Their teacher is famous even here. It is good to follow such a rabbi... a real honor... but there is a danger in her approach. She is an unattended woman and a gentile at that. It would be unseemly for Jesus to even speak with her... Maybe Jesus knows their

thoughts and so he plays into their expectations... the lesson is about to unfold...

She ran up and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." ²³ But Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us."

People are going to see and they clearly know who you are. We can't let her profane our rabbi...

Jesus has THEIR attention now... and so he begins... Turning to the desperate woman, He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me."

Aware of the thoughts of his followers that he is THEIR rabbi and his power belongs to THEM and to ISRAEL, not this gentile woman, Jesus gives the answer THEY hope for: “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” How horrible the words sound to us... and yet they are the words that underpin every moment throughout human history when another’s ethnicity or national origin have been used to dehumanize...

But this woman is wise and witty, emotionally intelligent and strong willed... rather than backing down and going away ashamed of things beyond her control or her choice, she makes her answer: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Even the dogs get to eat because

there is always enough... always enough in God's economy...
always...

The moment for the clear lesson has come. The gifts of God are no longer to be reserved merely for the in-group... The gifts of God are freely given in faith: Jesus, compassion now in his eyes, turns and looks at the in-group of his disciples, making sure he has their attention...

And turning now to his own creation in love, Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

This is a moment of Metanoia for the disciples and the whole world... Metanoia is Greek for a spiritual conversion... a return

to the purpose of God in creation. The story of salvation pivots in this moment from being a small Jewish sect toward the global movement of the Way of Jesus our Christ... in the healing of a young girl whose mother would not give in to the pressure of the people trying to shut her down in her appeal for the life of her child... and who dared to debate the Lord... and opened the disciples awareness and the gospel for all of us... reconciling the hope of God in Israel to the rest of the world just as surely as Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers. Here is GRACE...

Here there is ENOUGH...

Be bold and daring on behalf of the sick and the destitute...

When your assumptions are challenged, do not curse and walk away but see the lesson through... And when the system tells *you* to shut up and go away and that you are not worthy, stand

your ground and state clearly the terms of today's Gospel that everyone is worthy until you win the day.

Never give up. Jesus is counting on you to come through and prove his point.

AMEN.