

The Twelve Sunday after Pentecost  
August 16, 2026  
St. Michael's Church  
The Rev. Joshua Wong  
Gospel reading: Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

*Let us pray:* Create in us a clean heart O God, and remove any hidden impurity, pride, or judgment that separates us from you. Open our hearts to accept your teaching and guard my mouth so that the words I speak bring life and honor to your name. *Amen.*

Episcopal Bible commentator Dan Clendenin once wrote: “Driving home from church last week, I encountered a woman at a stoplight who was asking for help. There she was — standing dangerously in the heat of the day with all the exhaust fumes surrounding her, clutching a cardboard sign. Her appeal was an almost verbatim quote from the gospel for this week: "Sir, have mercy, please help my child at home.”

And there I was — sitting in my air-conditioned Prius, living in one of the wealthiest zip codes in the world, straight out of church, and feeling a little like the disciples for this week: "Send her away!" I knew I had about 10 seconds before the light turned green. And I knew that I had exactly \$11 in my wallet—a ten and a one.

I rolled down my window and gave her the ten, and felt a tiny bit better about myself.”

During this time in Jesus’ ministry, he made many enemies, namely the Pharisees who were taking note of all the things he did and said that offended them. Such as when Jesus told the crowd that eating with unwashed hands doesn’t defile a person, but what comes out of the mouth that proceeds from the heart is what defiles a person. They didn’t like hearing that because they knew he was referring to their hypocrisy. Hence, the Pharisees were out to threaten Jesus’ life. In response to these threats, Jesus withdraws, this time into Gentile territory which is in Sidon and Tyre. These towns are located in the coastal Phoenician region within the Roman province of Syria. The Syrophoenician people speak Greek and lived in a culturally blended borderland. Borderland countries are often described as uncertain, conditional intermediate spaces, or transitional zones shared by two different cultures, or states of being. In most cases, borderland living often involves volatility and instability. In our world today, there are still borderlands, some of these places include Ukraine, The Baltic States, Poland, Turkey, and closer to home, the cities between the United States and the Mexico border.

Jesus and his disciples arrived upon this foreign land and encounters a Gentile mother who asked him to heal her daughter who is severely oppressed by a demon.

Even in Sidon and Tyre, this woman had heard about Jesus as the prophet and healer. She cries out for help and counts on him as her last resort for healing.

The **unusual** message of this gospel is Jesus' lack of response to her request. Weren't we taught that the Christian message is fundamentally about divine inclusion conquering human exclusions? But instead, Jesus surprises us. The passage says, "But he did not answer her a word." Only later did he say to her, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

We may have experienced unanswered prayers as well and wondered where is Jesus?

When we read today's Gospel, there seems to be a disconnect between what Jesus says in the first half of today's gospel and how he behaves in the second half. In the first half Jesus tells us to, "Listen and understand," but in the second half, he seems to refuse to listen to the Canaanite woman and understand her life, her pain, and her needs. In a sense, it's like us waiting at a stoplight while someone is asking for our help. "Go away, you're a nuisance," we think to ourselves. We see but deny what is reality. So, was Jesus denying the need of this woman?

So let's try to understand what might be the reason.

When Matthew purposely includes the words “the region of Tyre and Sidon, and Canaanite,” he is emphasizing that they are in Gentile territory. In other words, they are away from home, they are foreigners with their own set of prejudices and misunderstandings.

After Jesus ignores her, we see that the woman was tenacious and won’t give up. The disciples came and begged him saying, “Send her away for she is crying out to us.” Sounds like something we would say. “Oh go away, you are too much of a reality I don’t want to face.” But, she falls to her knees and says, “Lord, help me.”

Among Bible scholars, there are different speculations for why Jesus doesn’t help her. Maybe he’s simply describing the reality of his mission: that the healing he offers is for the children of Israel first. Others say Jesus was testing her faith; as if her life was not enough of a test. But his answer still makes us uncomfortable.

Because that’s not the Jesus we were taught, but that’s the Jesus we get in this part of the gospel. But if we are honest, sometimes that’s the Jesus we get in life.

Jesus, I cried out to you, why aren’t you answering my prayer? Our discomfort may stem from a deeper theology of who we think Jesus is. More often than not, we want Jesus to be who WE wish him to be.

Do you know the children's song, "Jesus Loves me this I know?" for the Bible tells me so, little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong. Yes, Jesus loves me...."

Some of us know that song by heart. For many of us it describes the Jesus of our childhood. It's simple. It's easy. It conjures up images of a sentimental faith and a sweet, cuddly Jesus. It's a Jesus we can easily contain in a box that we can control. We may still hold on to those images of Jesus, but we all know that deep spiritual faith is more than that, because life is more complicated than that. The problem with this kind of faith is that it can encourage a naiveté about God, life, and the world.

All you need to do is to look at the pictures of the Somalian famine or watch the news. Study history. Walk amongst our guests at the food pantry. Talk with a cancer patient, balance the family budget, raise your kids, be faithful in your marriage, and look at the life of the Canaanite woman. We all have complicated unique stories. So we ask, where is Jesus in all of this? Too often a sentimental faith becomes cynical, causes us to turn away from our difficulties, or leaves us feeling paralyzed. Yet, Jesus calls us to a growing faith, one that can carry us through life's difficulties. He meets us at our unique stories and develops our faith. This may be what is happening between Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Our faith

is tested when the rubber meets the road. Prayers are not always answered the way we hope for, yet they are answered faithfully in God's time, in ways we often don't even know about.

Our new Bishop Antonio Gallardo spoke about his faith journey. Early in his life, he was attending a parish that had many Anglican nuns. One day, he was approached by one of them who said to him, "All the nuns have been praying for you, that one day you would be in full-time ministry. He said to her, sister, please stop praying for that. After many years, the Lord works in mysterious ways, and not only did he become ordained into Holy Order, but God called him to be our new Bishop. God answers our prayers according to his will and what is best for us.

We have all grown up since the days of singing "Jesus love me," but has our faith grown up? Faith needs to deepen in order to weather the storms in life. The Canaanite woman will tell you all about developing faith. She's an outsider living in the borderland that insiders don't want to be around. On top of that she is a woman, maybe a single mom in a society in which woman have no real value or standing. And to make matters worse, she has a screaming crazy kid.

We are like the Canaanite woman in one way or another. We are seeking God's transformation in one way or another. We have all had times when we feel like

we're at the end of the rope. Maybe a time when you received bad news about your health, or when you lost a job, or maybe you learned that your child has addiction issues, or that you faced the honest truth about your marriage. "help me Lord." Then there are days we don't get a response. But, just like the Canaanite woman, we learn to wait and listen.

As clergy, I am often asked, Why is God silent? I wish I knew. I don't have an answer. Even if I did I doubt it would be satisfactory. So I do the only thing I can do. I send them back and ask them to continue to pray, show up and wait.

Regardless of what God does or does not do, we show up. That's what the Canaanite woman did. She could have gone home, argued, gave up or asked, "Why?" But she didn't. Instead she came closer to Jesus, fell before him, and kept on worshipping him. She continues to show up believing that somehow it is enough to just be there before him. She doesn't know when or what Jesus will do. She only knows that she will be there when Jesus does answer her.

This time Jesus answers her. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Meaning the gospel message is for the Israelites alone, and Canaanites are less qualified. In today's time, those words may sound harsh or unsympathetic, but maybe there's a different issue here and it has nothing to do with Jesus or the woman. Remember at the time and place of this historical

writing, Jesus is naming the reality of the world in which they both live in. The reality is that there are unjust classes of people—there are children and there are dogs. Even today, the reality of **our** world is that there is still systematic injustice. Some are born into privilege, while most are not. Society has set unobtainable standards of who is in and who is out, what beauty image and skin color is more desirable than another. When Jesus and the Canaanite woman met, there was a systematic injustice structure already in place. It was there before either one of them were born. It was that way before they met and it is still that way for us today. That doesn't make it right and we should do all we can to change it. However, this is the world in which you and I must pray, the world in which you and I must live our faith, the world in which you and I must learn to show up and not give up. Life is neither simple nor fair and dogs don't eat the children's food in their world.

In their encounter, Jesus faces what racial and social injustice really is. He hears her responses and sees her faith. Yet the Canaanite woman has a honorable history of her own. A precious story that only she can tell. No one has the right to tell her story. How God answers her prayers and transforms her life can only be understood by her. You and I do as well. I believe Jesus answers our pray uniquely in the way that is relevant to us. We all have a complicated history that God is ready to heal



and make whole. But it requires us to show up and wait. God has a unique way of entering our lives in only the way we can understand.

The woman knows her situation. She even agrees with Jesus. “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She has again found a way to show up and be present with her faith, even when it seems everyone and everything is against her. This time Jesus speaks and acts. “Great is your faith,” he tells her. That very hour her daughter is healed.

Do you ever wonder why Jesus doesn’t answer your prayer? May we remain faithful, waiting and showing up. God promises to act, **in his way, and in his time** to fulfill our unique situations. Amen.