



ST. LUKE IN THE FIELDS  
CELEBRATING 200 YEARS

“THE WIDENESS OF GOD’S MERCY”  
PROPER 15A

ISAIAH 56:1, 6-8

PSALM 67

ROMANS 11:1-2A, 29-32

MATTHEW 15:10-28

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY  
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“Great is your faith” says Jesus to the Canaanite woman. A *Canaanite!...Woman!* This is the culmination of a profound conversion of heart in Jesus today. The Canaanites are Israel’s traditional enemies; the region is associated with Ba’al worship. The prominent Canaanite cities of Tyre and Sidon are associated with great wealth and decadence. Matthew says the woman “comes out” to meet Jesus – maybe at the border? Maybe Jesus doesn’t even cross over into Gentile territory?

It is beautiful how Jesus’ teaching and the real life encounter go together in today’s gospel. Jesus has been accused of rule-breaking by the Pharisees and they are correct, Jesus has been breaking the laws of purity around ritual washing. Then by Divine providence, another choice is presented to Jesus that very day. Observance of the purity codes of his own faith, or obedience to a higher Law of Divine mercy. With help from a persistent, brave, challenging Canaanite woman who is an agent of grace, Jesus opens the gate wider, pushing the boundaries outwards.

Sometimes it takes a nudge to do the right thing. If we read closely, three times Jesus denies this woman.

The number 3 is very important in the gospels. Three times Jesus wakes his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane<sup>1</sup>. Three denials of Peter<sup>2</sup>. Three times the Resurrected Jesus asks Peter: *Do you love me?*<sup>3</sup> When we see three iterations, we pay attention to the spiritual point. Here: Jesus ignores the woman's cries for help. Then he denies her again to the disciples. Then Jesus says No to the woman's face: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel....It's not my job; your people are not my job and therefore, neither are you.* This is a very human response from Jesus. ("It's not my responsibility. I can't bridge the ethnic divide between the Israelites and Canaanites"). And maybe Jesus can't accomplish all that on that very day. But Jesus comes to understand that he *can* help the person right in front of him now. There is no reason, no excuse, not to. In the end, Jesus helps the woman gladly, not begrudgingly.

What Jesus doesn't have here is a sudden, complete revelation. (Oh my goodness - *I am* sent to the Canaanites as well. Let me think about the soteriological implications of overriding the Hebrew codes of ritual purity...) Jesus doesn't concern himself at that moment with whether his whole sense of mission needs reconstructing. He looks at the woman

<sup>1</sup> eg. Matthew 26:36ff

<sup>2</sup> eg. Matthew 26:69ff.etc

<sup>3</sup> John 21:15ff.

in front of him and sees *her*. *Great is your faith. Let it be done for you as you wish.* It is in fact the woman's daughter who is healed. Inclusion, compassion, moves through her to heal her family.

If we are honest, I suspect we may have Jesus' voice *and* the Pharisees' voice jostling within us at different times. We feel the desire to offer ourselves, to help generously *and* a self-protective, withholding, hesitant instinct.

Jesus learns and grows because he listens to a victim, an outsider. From this unnamed woman he learns about God. Specifically Jesus learns more about the wideness of God's mercy about which we have just sung. We too learn more about God from those in need because we are challenged to go deeper, to walk the talk, to listen and help as we can. I find that ironically, the clue that we are about to learn something spiritually is often when we feel most powerless. Perhaps like Jesus, we encounter a situation, or a person who represents a larger situation, and think: *That's not my job. I can't fix that. There is nothing I can do to help.* And when we ourselves are poor or sick or in need or depressed and anxious,

we discover our common humanity – as Jesus does with the Canaanite woman. She is not as Other as he thought, and yes, he can do something to help.

It is easy to be overwhelmed in this moment with the huge needs of our world. How can we dismantle systems of white supremacy by which some of us have benefited massively, and which have formed us? What is the most effective way to engage anti-racist work? How do we reduce unemployment, feed the hungry, house the homeless? These are essential systemic, policy discussions. Meanwhile, we can probably help a person in front of us today. In my experience, Christian living is always a both-and balance between the two: chipping away generation after generation at the long-term issues of justice and equality *and* doing the work in front of us right now. Remember how in pre-pandemic “normal” life, when we have a dauntingly long to-do list, a good principle is: pick something and just get started? Don’t worry about doing it perfectly, begin somewhere and do the best you can with what is at hand. So maybe if someone asks for help on the street perhaps we are able to safely walk with them to buy them a sandwich and some water at a nearby store. Or maybe they need

toothpaste or some reading glasses from the local drugstore? And maybe a mask too? This is for sure part of the everyday work your clergy are doing and we can each share in this work in our own neighborhoods. As the needs of so many people become increasingly urgent, we are discussing how we can amplify our hands-on service at St. Luke's sustainably and safely for all.

How to help and when are questions of discernment in daily life. Jesus offers us some guidelines. He sees each person as an individual. Jesus shifts from the question: is this need my job? *Should* I help this woman? Is this person my responsibility? to: *Can* I help this woman? *How* can I help? In this way, Jesus moves from theoretical and theological constructs to the everyday works of love.

Let us open the gates of our heart. When in doubt, let us err on the side of inclusion. Let us do the works of love moment by moment. We don't know ahead of time what the call of love may be on any given day, but the journey of faith is such that we are formed by Christ. So when the moment to act arrives, we usually

know what the work of love is. I leave you with some inspiring words, usually attributed to John Wesley, to live by:

*Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can.*

AMEN

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