

August 16, 2020
The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 15—Year A
The Rev. Keri T. Aubert
St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, CT

[Morning Prayer]
Psalm 133
Genesis 45:1-15
Matthew 15:10-28

Our homily time will be a little different today. I'll say a few words, then we'll hear the passage again, and then I'll invite your thoughts.

When asked to name my favorite Bible passage, the one that usually comes to mind is this short story about the Canaanite woman. She is an improbable heroine. As woman and as gentile, she should not have been there with Jesus. But she's there, rejecting the humiliation these men would heap upon her. Is she impudent or courageous or simply desperate? Maybe previous humiliations changed her, made her this person who is impudent or courageous or desperate. There almost certainly would have been previous humiliations. Then, as now, her neighbors would have suspected that she was to blame for her daughter's condition. She might herself have sometimes wondered. She doesn't know why her daughter is sick, but she knows that Jesus holds the cure, and she won't let him withhold it because she's not Jewish. The disciples want to chase her off like the dog that Jesus calls her. But *she* levels the parry that wins the day.

In Matthew, Jesus' verbal fencing matches are generally reserved for the Pharisees, who are less formidable opponents than the Canaanite woman proves to be. A case in point is the first section of today's reading. You have to read some earlier verses to get the full context for what we heard. The Pharisees have questioned Jesus, not about what the disciples are eating, but rather about why they're eating without first washing their hands. To further set the context, know that handwashing is not part of the Jewish purity code required by Leviticus. Handwashing is instead an extra-Biblical tradition. The Pharisees have adopted it, and apparently they think everyone else should, too. Jesus says it doesn't matter and lists what does matter. A very current term that we might use for this exchange is "virtue signaling." Jesus echoes the Hebrew Scriptures as he condemns accreted and ultimately empty demonstrations of piety and instead lifts up virtuous interpersonal behavior that that creates healthy community.

The lectionary always pairs the story of the Canaanite woman with the preceding verses about defilement, which are optional for today. I've always ignored the defilement part to preach about the Canaanite woman. But this week I've been thinking about how those two stories are related. It's easy to draw dots between these stories and things in the news today: handwashing; hateful speech; racism.

I got stuck on the idea that both stories involve issues of purity. Then as now, purity has to do with access to God; it has to do with sanctification and ultimately salvation, of the individual and of the community. In these stories, the Canaanite woman faces criticism for not being Jewish, but the disciples face criticism for not being Jewish enough. In the end, Jesus seems to say that everyone is *enough*. But I'm not sure we've resolved that. Who is *enough*? What does it take to *be* enough?

Over the last couple of weeks, I happened to hear parts of the faith stories of some famous queer people—comedian Cameron Esposito, soccer star Abby Wambach, and her wife Glennon Doyle. The most famous among this is Glennon Doyle—her most recent memoir, *Untamed*, is on *The New York Times* bestseller list. All three grew up Roman Catholic. After coming out, all three have a broken relationship with Christianity—none are Roman Catholic, and only Doyle even allows the possibility of being Christian. Interestingly, both Jakki took a different path—we both *returned* to Christianity after coming out. But it hasn't always been an easy mix, especially when I see evidence of how far our own tradition has to go—not just when it comes to queer folks; but about so much more. Tradition is important. Piety is important. I think we have to uphold them without blocking out those we should be including. I think we have to uphold them in ways that don't end up blocking us from God.

Let's hear the Gospel again, and then I'll invite your thoughts.