St. Thomas's Episcopal Church
August 16, 2026

Readings:

https://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp15_RCL.html

I keep thinking back fondly on a memorable evening with two fellow pastors about ten days ago. We realized during our conversation that it had been five years since we'd all been together and that five years ago we were each walking alongside parishes during Covid-19. It was meaningful and helpful sharing memories. Some were laments of course and memories of loss, but we ended with what one of my friend called "grace notes" — memories of moments when light managed to shine through, where the presence of the Spirit couldn't be denied. I shared two. One flowed from the outdoor service we began. For a music-loving parish, we wondered at first what we'd do without the organ and piano. But within a few weeks, something just bubbled up that we wound up calling the Parking Lot Band. We didn't even know we had a percussionist in the congregation who had gone to conservatory. We didn't know we had a flutist who also had a strong singing voice. They were very humble about their efforts, but we all loved the Parking Lot Band and they brought much joy.

That was one grace note. The other was the story of Lou. Lou's beloved Patty was in a nursing home and she'd been there for more than a year. Every day, every single one, over that year he'd gone to the nursing home to spend time with her. He hadn't missed one. And so when visiting had to be suspended, he saw the wisdom in it *and* he had an idea. And so he called one of the staff who knew him well by this point and he pitched his idea. Patty was on the ground floor, he said, and her room faced onto a small courtyard. Would it be OK for him to come and be in the courtyard outside and continue his daily visits? That would allow him to be near her. The staff thought about it and came back with their answer. Yes. And so Lou's visits continued, but this time with Lou's setting up a folding chair every day in the courtyard, just outside the window, so he could be near Patty. And once again, he never missed a single one.

These grace notes are both stories of determination, resilience and creativity. *And — they are love stories*. I'll hold the picture of Lou in my memory forever. He didn't bring a book or his phone; he was happy to sit with no other activity than just to be there. He wanted to be near her.

Friends, I was so delighted to return today and find this feast of readings before us, all of them stories of determination and resilience and *all of them* love stories. Let's go ahead and start with her, the remarkable Canaanite woman who is the protagonist in today's gospel and for me at least one of scripture's handful of greatest heroes. It's quite an eye-popping story, really. Jesus and an unnamed group of disciples have likely traveled for two days or so to make the 40-mile trip to the port cities of Tyre and Sidon. They are Canaanite cities, so it's more than reasonable that this Canaanite woman comes to seek healing for her daughter. Yet she is received at first silently, and then dismissively, and then even rather insultingly. Healing is for the lost among the People Israel, she's told; the children, in other words, not the dogs under the table. She doesn't hesitate. OK,

but the dogs do get to have the crumbs, after all, she replies. And with this fierce, wise, unflinching response, her plea is heard and her daughter is healed.

She's creative, she's quick, she's determined and she's resilient. All true. And- more than anything else, she loves her daughter. That's what gets her there! That's what keeps her in despite the odds. This is a *love story*. The Canaanite woman will do anything, risk anything, to fight for the one she loves. Anyone with a child understands. All of us with children in our lives, and that's all of us, understand as well. The woman takes considerable risks here, violating deeply-embedded social norms, speaking loudly, debating, taking on an authority figure whose fame has clearly preceded him. It doesn't matter. That's what you do when you love someone. We're told that her daughter was suffering from a demon, as a whole host of conditions were known in the ancient world. Was it seizures? Was it a neurological disorder? We don't know. We just know that fierce, raw love won; love prevailed and the circle expanded.

Love won in Egypt as well, against all odds. If we know even the merest outline of the backstory, we know that Joseph — by his own brothers, no less — had been stripped, thrown down a well and left for dead before being pulled out and sold to traveling merchants. The merchants had taken him to Egypt, and sold him into the Pharaoh's court, where he wound up, through wisdom, resilience and determination of his own, being made second in command by the Pharaoh. We enter the story today near the very end. Joseph's brothers, starving in a widespread famine, have made the trip to Egypt seeking food. They've come as a last chance to survive, in essence. And of all things, the one they come to seeking survival is none other than the one who they threw down a well and sold into slavery. It would almost make more sense if this story had ended in a settling of scores, some kind of righting of the balance, something retributive. But this, my friends, is a love story, and we see it all over the page as necks are wept upon and brothers are embraced and kissed and relationships restored.

That's quite a love story. But there's one more, a final one before us today, and it's in some sense the greatest of them all, the love story that fuels and charges all other love stories. And it's found today, perhaps surprisingly, in Paul. Paul's great gift was answering questions. His letters aren't the product of time spent in abstract theological reflection; they are answers to questions and responses to the very real growing pains shared with him by the Jesus-following communities he had founded. And he must have gotten this question a lot. What about those who haven't chosen to follow Jesus? What about those who still await the Messiah's coming? What did God's work in Jesus and in the cross mean for the old covenants? The covenants with Moses and Abraham? The older ways of being made right with God?

Paul's answer is very simple. This is a love story, Paul says. It's the story of the love between God and God's people. And here's the thing you need to know about God, Paul says. God's love never fails. It never fails and it never ends. God never breaks promises, including those promises! There is nothing stronger than God's love. It's fierce, it's unshakeable, it's not up for debate; one need never worry. God's love is the one thing we can count on, Paul assures us, never to end. Never to fail. We already know the story's ending, Paul says. God's love and promises endure.

And so my friends, we've come to behold love stories here today, an array of love stories; stories of determination and resilience, of wisdom and creativity, all fueled by love. And we'll walk from

here, as they who lived and heard these stories did, into a bewildering world filled with challenge and division, charged to breathe God's love story into the world and to continue writing our own chapter in that love story, living not in scarcity and suspicion; fractiousness and fear; but knowing in every moment of every day that God's love always endures, and that we do indeed know the ending of the story. Love wins and thus we live lives as *she* did, as *he* did, of the fierce, determined, forgiving, restoring, redeeming love that comes only, always and eternally from the one who came to show us God and to invite us into fullness of redemptive life with him. Alleluia. Amen.