

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander
Proper 15 (A) ~ 16 August 2026
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda
Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133
Matthew 15:21-28

Let us pray:

We do not presume to come to this your Table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in your manifold and great mercies. We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under your Table. But you are the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy...

In the Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

~ "Prayer of Humble Access" (adapted), *BCP*

Today if you were to visit Bethlehem, the city in the Holy Land whose name means "House of Bread," the place known throughout history and throughout the world as the birthplace of Jesus, you might be surprised.

You might be shocked, in fact.

Because the idyllic "little town" of Christmas carol fame is surrounded by a wall.

Not an ancient wall like the one around the Old City of Jerusalem, but a modern, 21st-century, West Bank wall that for 20 years has marked the boundary between Israel and the Palestinian territory.

Israel calls the wall a “security barrier” intended to prevent terrorism.

Palestinians refer to it as the “racial segregation wall,” or “apartheid wall.”¹ It is covered with political sentiment – and not just any garden-variety graffiti. The street artist Banksy was among the first to record his opinion in poignant painted images.

No matter what its name, the wall’s purpose is clear:

Separate. Divide. Cut off. Isolate.

It is unsettling – not to mention very dangerous – to visit the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square these days. The wall will not be ignored.

That the site where the Prince of Peace lay in swaddling clothes should be shrouded in barbed wire is deeply disturbing.

It speaks to the most troubling aspects of human nature and reminds us why we need a Savior.

We need a God Who will walk through walls and cross over boundaries because we just don’t seem to be capable on our own.

This is why we need Jesus.

What, then, do we do with the Jesus Whom we meet in today’s Gospel reading?

This Jesus sounds more like someone Who might have helped *build* the West Bank wall rather than dismantling it.

This Jesus *is* unsettling.

¹ Dona J. Stewart, *The Middle East Today: Political, Geographical and Cultural Perspectives* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 223.

Fresh off feeding the Five Thousand and rescuing Peter and the others on the Sea of Galilee, Jesus travels to Tyre and Sidon, in what is now Lebanon.

To the Jews of Jesus's day, this is *enemy* territory.

This is the land of idol worship.

This is the land that, according to Torah, the Israelites are supposed to *destroy*.

“Make no covenant.”

“Show them no mercy.”²

Separate. Divide. Cut off. Isolate.

That's okay, we might say. *We know what Jesus will do*. Jesus isn't One to be bound by “supposed-to's.”

Jesus is all about mercy. *Just watch*.

Except that when we do watch, what we see is so disappointing.

And what we hear is even worse.

Can this be *our* Jesus?

“Our” Jesus once asked, “Will anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, give him a stone?”³

Of course not.

² Deuteronomy 7:2

³ Matthew 7:9-10

And yet: Today Matthew tells us that Jesus travels from the Galilee north – about 50 miles north – to these two port cities in Gentile territory.

He leaves the land of His people.

One might say He is trespassing.

And there He meets a desperate woman.

A mother at the end of her rope.

A parent longing to help her child.

Have mercy on me, Lord.

A Canaanite woman.

From the land of the enemy.

And at first Jesus says *nothing*.

Make no covenant.

Show them no mercy.

Nevertheless, she persists.

Have mercy on me, Lord.

Soon, the disciples can't take it any longer.

Send her away - please! Make it stop!

Jesus tells them:

I was sent only to Israel.

And so the wall begins.

She says it again:

Lord, help me.

Another stone is laid.

It is not fair to throw the children's food to the dogs.

There it is.

Wow.

The Greek says “good,” or “suitable,” or “admirable” instead of “fair.”

But no matter how you translate it, this doesn't sound much like Jesus.

Like *our* Jesus.

This sounds like prejudice, and sexism.

He calls her a *dog*, after all.

Can this be Mary's Son?

Maybe Jesus isn't really Who we thought He was.

I can tell you that, as a preacher, this is a difficult day to be on Team Jesus.

It's disappointing, and I would even say *offensive*, to hear Jesus speak this way.

We expect so much more.

Until, perhaps, we remember the Baby in the manger, in swaddling clothes.

Until we recall that Jesus was *born* like you and like me.

Until we ponder that He wears our skin.

Until we consider that He once was a little boy Who fell down and scraped His knees and stood back up again.

And as a boy Jesus was taught, carefully.

He learned at the feet of the rabbis in the synagogue and at the dinner table with Mary and Joseph and from His neighbors in Nazareth, where He grew up.

And if we believe that Jesus has entered in to our experience, then that suggests *all* of it – the good, the bad, and the ugly alike.

Can we say that Jesus is fully human if there are limits on His humanity?

If we rejoice on Christmas that Jesus is *one of us*, then we need to let Him *be* one of us.

That's the point, after all, of God becoming human.

Jesus goes into the wilderness, where He is hungry and thirsty and tempted so that He can experience and *understand* hunger and thirst and temptation.

Jesus goes to the cross and the grave so that He can experience and understand and *redeem* death.

And Jesus goes to the place of separation and division so that He can experience and understand and redeem human prejudice, too.

It's *not* fair, it's *not* suitable, by human standards, to show mercy on one's enemies, to waste precious resources on those we consider beneath us.

That's the way of the world as we know it.

Jesus speaks the world's truth...And it's a harsh truth.

He shines a light on human nature that isn't particularly flattering.

It isn't pretty.

We want to avert our gaze and not look at that aspect of ourselves.

But it's real.

It's who we are and what we do.

We separate. Divide. Cut off. Isolate.

Jesus names it.

We may not like the way Jesus sounds because He sounds so much like *us*.

But this woman names some truth, too.

Even the dogs eat the crumbs...

Yes, Lord, that *is* the way of the world, she says.

But it's not the way of God.

God, Who sows with abandon, without regard for where the seeds land.

God, Whose love is extravagant – one might even say wasteful, or *prodigal*.

God, Who multiplies meager crumbs to feed multitudes – with leftovers to spare.

This woman from Canaan might live in enemy territory but she's been listening, and she has heard.

She knows enough to expect more from God than what the world offers.

She may expect more than the disciples do.

As a boy Jesus learned at the feet of the rabbis in the synagogue and at the dinner table with Mary and Joseph and from His neighbors in Nazareth, where He grew up.

And now, I think, He learns from this woman, too.

He hears her faith – the faith of an “outsider.”

Perhaps, in this moment, Jesus realizes that His mission is bigger than even He anticipated.

The point is that Jesus experiences and understands and redeems her desperation and her pain.

He is moved, deep inside Himself, by this encounter.

He has compassion for her – as only the God wearing our skin can.

This makes me wonder...

Do *I* ask enough from Jesus?

Do I take Him seriously enough to cry out for mercy?

To demand it?

Do *you*?

Do we expect more from God than what the world offers?

Do our prayers reflect faith in God's abundance, in God's mercy – or are they bound by the walls of our tradition, and of our fear?

Are they limited by the scope of our imagination and the capacity of our courage?

Do we believe that his property is always to have mercy?

Food for thought.

Amen.