

**Sunday, August 20, 2023**  
**Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 15 Year A)**

Matthew 15.21-28

*The Rev. Michael K. Fincher*

*Service Live Streamed at:*

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/129529736893058>

*(Sermon begins at about 18:35)*

**“Identities and Barriers”**

Who are you? A simple enough question, but not always so simple to answer. Who we are is a very complex matter. There is so much that goes into our conception of who we are as individuals and as a collective—into our identity. So many aspects and characteristics that form our unique identities. Some of these being “given,” being beyond our control, such as sex, race or ethnicity, nationality, family of origin, sexual orientation, and virtually every physical attribute we possess. Aspects and characteristics that are more or less visible, and by and large, not readily changed other than by natural processes such as growth and aging (sex and gender identity being the exception for some). And then there are those aspects of our identity over which we have some conscious choice. Such as religion, moral values, political beliefs, choice of vocation or profession. Aspects and characteristics that are not directly visible, and which are more readily changeable if one so desires. Although, by and large, only changed after careful consideration and often with substantial effort. And then there are those aspects of our lives which help form our identity which are based more on interest, necessity, or circumstance, such as where we live, our choice of friends and acquaintances, organizations we belong to. Things that can and often do change over time, yet influence our sense of identity nonetheless. All of these coming together, combining and contributing to the unique identity that makes each of us who we are.

While there is a complex and interwoven set of characteristics that form our identity, how we view these varies by individual, and even by context. Many aspects we do not even think about on a regular basis. Yet in a particular situation some aspects of one’s identity may be more important than others and more important than at other times. For example, on a day-to-day basis, your nationality probably does not even enter your consciousness and certainly does not impact how you operate. But travel abroad and your nationality becomes more important and can impact what you do and how you do it. Depending on where we are and who we are with, different aspects of our identity can be and often are more prominent, more obvious, or more germane to the situation than at other times. In some contexts, these aspects of our identity can be a unifying force, a source of mutuality and camaraderie. When people discover they share similarities, bringing them closer together.

But then, depending on where we are and who we are with, aspects of identity can become barriers. One only has to recall the history of racial divisions in many parts of our country, with some being excluded based purely on the color of their skin—which sadly, still happens in many ways in our own day. Or, if not creating actual barriers, aspects of our identity can result in animosity or worse, such as tensions over political beliefs and issues driving wedges between people and, in some cases, closing off relationship.

Our Gospel reading for today puts the issue of identity on full display, and demonstrates how differences in identity can create barriers. While traveling, Jesus crosses from his home country of Israel into Canaanite territory, where he encounters a local woman. Both the woman and Jesus obviously have their own identities, which differ in some fairly significant ways. Differences that, by their very nature, immediately create a barrier between the two. Differences that influence their interaction, at least initially.

At first glance, the most obvious difference between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is sex. In the ancient Near East, men and women who were not related just did not normally interact. An immediate barrier to communications and certainly to relationship.

The next obvious difference in identity is that of nationality. Jesus is from Israel and the woman is from Canaan, with their own ethnic, cultural, and political differences. On the surface, such differences would not necessarily be a barrier. The real issue here was history. Israel and Canaan were old and bitter enemies. Primarily due to the fact that when the Israelites came to the Promised Land after the exodus from Egypt, it was already occupied by the Canaanites. As it began establishing its own nation, Israel took control of the Canaanites' ancestral lands and pushed the Canaanites out. So, 1,300 years later, the Canaanites were still a little bitter. Creating animosity, if not outright hostility, between the two nations. Another barrier based on identity—that of enemy as opposed to friend.

And the third difference in identity is religious. Jesus was Jewish and the woman was a Gentile—a not-Jew—likely adhering to the pagan religious practices of the Canaanites. Bringing with it the reluctance, particularly on the part of a Jew, to have too much contact with a Gentile. Yet one more barrier based on identity. That of perceived distinctions between sacred and profane.

Both Jesus and the woman recognize the differences in identity and the barriers that those differences in identity pose. And both seek to navigate the differences and the resulting barriers in different ways. Customarily, and under normal circumstances, these differences and the barriers they pose would have been respected by both parties. With each going on their way with minimal interaction. No harm, no foul. When the woman first approaches Jesus, she seems to be trying to respect the societally imposed barriers. This is indicated by the fact that she shouts out to him, seeking to maintain physical distance that these barriers dictate. And Jesus attempts to maintain the barriers by initially ignoring her, not answering her at all.

But in this case, there are extenuating circumstances—namely the woman's desperation for healing for her demon-possessed daughter. Somehow, she knows who Jesus is and feels that he might be able to provide the healing her daughter needs. She is not going to be deterred by some artificially imposed social, national, and religious barriers. Out of that profound need, in her desperation, out of her faith in Jesus' ability to help, she is willing to overlook those barriers. She is willing to tear those barriers down. So she persists. Which means Jesus has to respond. And his response is completely consistent with the array of barriers presented. He responds with "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Making it clear that he cannot help her, not because of her gender, but most certainly because of her nationality and

her religion. Essentially saying that his role, his purpose, his identity, is as Messiah for the Jewish people of Israel and not for the Gentiles of Canaan or any other nation, for that matter. Seeking to reinforcing the national and religious barriers between them.

And yet, the woman persists: “Lord, help me.” To which Jesus responds “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Here we enter into delicate territory. Jesus employs an ethnic slur common to his culture. For Jews, dogs were unclean animals. To refer to Gentiles as dogs was a common way of expressing and reinforcing the animosity between Jews and Gentiles. And it was likely that Canaanites also referred to Jews as dogs. Nonetheless, this is not Jesus’ finest moment. Because no matter how people have tried to soften it or spin it, Jesus did use an unflattering slur against the woman and her people. But then again, we must recognize that Jesus, while Divine, was also very much human. And he was very much the product of his own culture and religion, which shaped his identity. Barriers and all.

Nonetheless, the unfortunate comment provided an opportunity for redemption. For all parties involved. While Jesus’ comment was meant to remind the woman of the barrier that exists between them, the woman’s response proves to be the sledgehammer that tears that barrier down: “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” She calls him out. Almost as if she has some deeper understanding of Jesus’ true identity. Perhaps, in a strange way, a deeper understanding than Jesus has of his own identity. The words of a pagan, foreign woman reminding Jesus that while he may be a Jewish man from Israel, his ultimate purpose as the Messiah, as the Son of God, transcends the limitations, transcends the barriers, of any one religion, any one nation, any one identity. And to his credit, Jesus gets the message. “Woman, great is your faith!” And because of her faith, her daughter was healed.

And because of the woman’s faith—and her persistence—Jesus was able to recognize that he had unjustly and unwittingly bought into the limitations inherent within the cultural, national, and religious identities that he had inherited. That had helped shape who he was. With that recognition, he was able to make necessary adjustments and live more fully into who he is called to be as the Messiah. Not just for the Jewish people, but for all people. In so doing, Jesus is able to participate in the dismantling of the barriers that had initially separated him from the Canaanite woman and to embrace her as an equal—as a fellow child of God, as a person of profound faith.

Today’s Gospel reading demonstrates the dangers of allowing preconceived notions about identity to become barriers to relationship. And it demonstrates how a willingness to look beyond such preconceived notions, to see our identities in a different light, to look for the commonalities in our varied identities, can begin to break down those barriers which divide us.

Perhaps most significantly, this is a story of the development of one of the most important identities one can have: that of being a person of faith. That when we live out of faith, we are able to expand our perspective to recognize that all whom we encounter, regardless of identity, are first and foremost beloved children of God. Only then will the barriers we had previously erected begin to crumble.