

Proper 15, Year A, Matthew 15
August 16, 2020
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
Teri Daily

I cannot begin to list all the things I've learned since becoming a priest almost twelve years ago – and many of those things were never even mentioned in seminary. At the first church I served as priest, I learned that whether or not a roof leaks is a complex algorithm having to do with the surface area of the roof, the volume of water that can be held by the interior gutters, the size and number of downspouts, the rate at which the rain falls, and the amount of leaves and other debris that take up space in the gutters. I learned that when the values of all those variables come together just right, the roof leaks – badly.

Over the last six months, I've learned that hand sanitizer needs to be more than 60% ethanol or 70% isopropanol to kill the novel coronavirus, where to go when someone has been evicted and needs help to pay for a room at the Park Motel, and how to choreograph liturgy such that all participants remain six feet from one another.

I've also learned that an incredibly real, gritty, and deep love can be found within the messiness of parish life – and that most often that love is manifest in the very midst of all the craziness, not apart from it. See, job descriptions definitely don't tell you all the things you need to know and do, but they don't tell you all the blessings you will receive either.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is already worn out just by things already in his job description. Ever since finding out that John the Baptist has been killed by Herod, Jesus has tried to get some time alone. First, he withdraws in a boat to a deserted place. But the crowds follow him and, instead of spending some time in solitude, he ends up curing their illnesses and preparing a banquet from a few loaves of bread and a couple of fishes. He then tries again to have his own space, this time sending the disciples on ahead in the boat while he goes up the mountain to pray. But when he sees his friends being tossed around on the sea in a storm, he goes to them. When the boat does land on the shore, he's bombarded by people wanting to be healed, begging even just to touch the hem of his garment. And then, in the midst of all this, the Pharisees and the scribes come to Jesus to register a complaint about Jesus' followers – why don't they wash their hands before they eat? I suspect that by this point Jesus is tired and more than a little overwhelmed by what's coming at him from all sides.

Enter the Canaanite woman, an outsider by Jewish standards. She's shouting at the top of her lungs: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David, my daughter is tormented by a demon." Far from the kind, never-tired-or-rattled Jesus that most of us picture in our minds, the Jesus in this story doesn't even answer her. And the disciples are even more dismissive of the woman. "Send her away," they tell Jesus, "for she keeps shouting and bothering us." Jesus says: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Jesus knows his job description, and he's sticking to it. Jesus has been sent to the people of Israel and, as we've seen, that's a big enough

challenge in and of itself. He can't be expected to take care of everyone else; he doesn't have the time or energy. Right?

But the Canaanite woman won't fade into the background that easily – she won't go quietly. Instead, she comes and kneels in front of him, saying "Lord, help me." And here comes the response from Jesus that is so harsh and rude that we hardly know what to do with it. Jesus says: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Now, Christians have tried lots of ways to soften this statement. Perhaps Jesus is merely testing her faith; he doesn't really mean what he's saying. Or maybe this story reflects the view of Jewish Christians towards Gentile Christians in the early Church, so it's not really about Jesus at all but about the early Church. Or better yet, maybe Matthew is just setting up a dramatic scene after which the inclusion of non-Jewish people in the early Church is all the more striking. It's even been said that "puppies" here is actually a term of endearment, although that's a real stretch if you ask me. Whatever the scenario behind this statement, it is what it is – rude and difficult to understand.

Usually it's Jesus we see humiliated in the gospels, quietly and humbly taking whatever is dished out at him. But in this story, it's the Canaanite woman who plays that role – persistently, humbly holding her own in the conversation, maybe even besting Jesus at his own game. She just keeps knocking on the door, refusing to be turned away. "Yes, Lord," she says. "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." In that moment, the woman's daughter is healed, and the door she's been knocking on is thrown wide open. What has been up to this point a contained, narrow mission, now explodes into a mission to all people. Perhaps just when Jesus is most tired and overwhelmed by the task that belongs to the Jewish messiah – to feed the lost sheep of the house of Israel – it's exactly then that he's also confronted with all the need that lies *beyond* his own people.

Maybe that's what it's always meant to be God's people, to live with the porch light on and the door open. In one of the servant songs from the book of Isaiah, the Lord says,

*It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to restore the survivors of Israel;
I will give you as a light to the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.* (Isaiah 49:6)

Despite all the purity laws we find in the Torah, maybe God's people never were, in the final assessment, meant to be exclusive, or to draw uncrossable boundaries, or to try to limit salvation to those they deem suitable. But, let's face it, being open to whoever God places in our path can seem like very hard work – it can seem like too much, as we see in today's gospel reading.

I'm reminded of a sermon I heard in 2012 at General Convention, the national conference of the Episcopal Church, given by Gene Robinson, the first openly gay bishop in the Episcopal

Church. That night he reminded the congregation that God had asked Abraham to live in tents. Bishop Robinson said: “[Abraham] and the people with him dreamt of the city with foundations. They dreamt of a real, honest-to-God city — you know, with foundations and that stayed in the same place all the time. But God asked them to live in tents.” Robinson went on to say that he knew firsthand what it must have felt like for Abraham:

I want some answers to things. I want things to stay where I put them and to stay where I think them, and I don't like to be asked to move on and then move on again and to move on again. And yet, it seems to be the biblical witness that God means for us to live in tents and to move from place to place and to never finally settle down until we're all in heaven. We are meant to live, in this world at least, in tents.

Basically, I think Bishop Robinson was reminding us that every time we Christians think we have our job description figured out, then watch out, because we're probably getting ready to experience the famous clause “and other duties not otherwise specified.” As Bishop Robinson said, as soon as we get a handle on one ministry, ‘God is going to point out somebody else that we haven't been paying attention to.’ God is “always going to be calling us forward.”¹

That's what it means to be God's people. Every time we think we have our ministry mapped out, God widens our heart, breaks open doors that have been closed, and blurs the boundaries. The Holy Spirit puts someone just like the Canaanite woman right in front of us, and says: *Here, this one is also my child. Care for them, too.* It may be refugees on the border of Texas and Mexico – in need of clothes, water, food, and shelter. It may be those who are being evicted from their homes as the economy worsens in this pandemic. It may be those who struggle with addiction, mental illness, or Covid-19. There's no shortage of people for whom we may be called upon to move our tents, to broaden our mission, or to make room in our community. And as our mission broadens in ways and places we never expected, so will our joy and blessings. The kingdom of heaven is made of "duties not otherwise specified."

¹ Sharon Sheridan, "God calls us forward, Bishop Robinson says at Integrity Eucharist," *Episcopal News Service*, <https://www.episcopalnewsservice.org/2012/07/10/god-keeps-calling-us-forward-bishop-robinson-says-at-integrity-eucharist/>.