



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

August 15, 2026:

Proper 15 A: [Genesis 45:1-15](#); [Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32](#); [Matthew 15:21-28](#)

When I lived in Maryland, my congregation participated in something called “Christmas in April.” Now called “Rebuilding Together,” “Christmas in April” was a one-day “Habitat for Humanity” home makeover blitz. Each group that participated was given the address of a home in need of help and a list of specific tasks to accomplish. Tasks included everything to painting, roofing, lawn care, and minor repairs: all chosen to fit the needs of the residents, the skills and numbers of volunteers, and still be accomplished in one 8-hour day. The organizers were very strict about sticking to assigned tasks and avoiding what is known as mission-creep. (If your group finished early, you were supposed to go and help another group finish their work rather than starting something new.) The temptation to do more than assigned became real for our team about 3:00 in the afternoon, when someone noticed that the back steps of the house we were working on were falling apart and the back porch was caving in. We called our supervisor and asked about fixing them but were told those things were not on our list and we were just supposed to work on the front of the house. We listened obediently but as soon as the supervisor hung up, we went straight to the back of the house, used 4 by 4s to reinforce the sagging porch and reinforced the steps so they wouldn’t collapse. If you think avoiding mission creep is a problem with porches, imagine it with people. A couple of years ago – and a couple of days before Christmas – my cathedral in Portland got a message that the city was about to get a sudden influx of 1000 refugees and asylum seekers. They had shelter at night but needed a place to stay warm during the day in the week between Christmas and New Year’s Day. Though the cathedral was closed during that time and many of our volunteers were going to be gone for Christmas vacation, we said yes and got everything together to make it happen in our parish hall. The city was clear that these warming shelters were to be reserved specifically for refugees and asylum seekers, so that’s what we told people in our bulletins and other communications. The response would make you think that we just took away Christmas. My outreach chair came to me in tears asking why we would say there was no room at the inn. Some of our regular volunteers refused to help.

Others accused us of reverse racism, asking why we would help immigrants (who were mostly black) and not locals (who were mostly not.) What hurt the most in hearing those complaints was the realization that people didn't know me or the cathedral community as well as I thought they did. Did we turn away anyone who showed up? Of course not. Did we tell the city? Didn't do that either.

Today's gospel shows Jesus struggling with mission-creep. Christianity would go global with Pentecost, and Peter and Paul. Jesus, however, had clear marching orders. His task was supposed to focus the Jewish people first. Remember that Jesus didn't set out to start a new religion, he came to reform an old one and had a limited amount of time and a small and not very skilled team to make this happen. He felt the pressure and frustration when people didn't get it or got in the way. This passage, however, isn't just about mission creep. It is also about PR. This passage is from the gospel of Matthew. Matthew was writing to a Jewish audience. More specifically, he was writing to a Jewish audience in crisis. This was the time just after Israel had been defeated by the Romans, the temple had been destroyed, the Jewish people had been dispersed, and it looked like Judaism itself was going to die. Matthew wanted his readers to know that their religion had not been defeated but was in fact being completed, renewed and reborn in Jesus Christ. Matthew knew Christianity would grow far beyond its Jewish roots but waited for the last verses of his gospel to make that clear. The other gospels were written to non-Jewish audiences and didn't worry as much about these things. The other gospels – particularly Luke - were inclusive from the start, with Jesus continually interacting with Samaritans and others outside the Jewish fold. Samaritans, at least, had Jewish roots. Canaanites were the ancient enemies of Israel, people who worshiped foreign gods. Matthew, I suggest, included Jesus' rejection of the Canaanite woman in order to score political points with his audience. Scholars are quick to mention that the Greek word translated in our reading as "dog" meant "small dog" or "puppy" and that it might more accurately be translated as "pet." This softens it a bit, but Jesus' words to the Canaanite woman are still harsh. In the Creed we talk about Jesus being fully human. It's not a surprise that a fully human Jesus carried some of the prejudices from the rural backwater in which he was raised. What is surprising is that the Canaanite woman had the courage to speak back to Jesus... and that when she confronted him about his prejudice, he changed his mind and changed his heart.

I don't know about this St. Luke's but my former St. Luke's spent several years studying and struggling with issues around prejudice and race. I had to come to grips with my own racism, my own privilege, my own power and a system that perpetuates all of these things, none of which I was really aware. It took some deep pain and truly wrenching experiences to realize that these things existed in me and that I – like Jesus in this morning's gospel – had sometimes said and done things that were contrary to who I am and the message I try to proclaim.

The story of Joseph and the story of Jesus say that it's never too late for repentance to happen and reconciliation to being. Joseph's big "reveal," the dramatic conclusion of the story of the coat of many colors and his brothers selling him into slavery, was a true Hollywood moment. Joseph could have used this moment as an opportunity for revenge. Instead, he turned it into a time of reconciliation, of forgiveness and healing, of hospitality and welcome, and of bringing together a family that had been broken back together. In doing these things, he set the stage for the future of his people, the coming of Moses, and everything that would happen next. The Canaanite woman experienced an all too human side of Jesus. Her cries, however, were able to break through his protective wall of prejudice and reach the divine part of him that was underneath. She not only turned around his mind, she also turned around his heart... and the heart of the church that would bear his name. At the same time, her daughter was healed. As Romans concludes, the Good News is that God shows mercy to all. There is hope for all of us -- even for you and me. Jesus approached the Canaanite woman worrying about mission-creep. He left the Canaanite woman gospel understanding what his mission was really all about.

So what about you? Do your actions ever surprise you in the way that Jesus' actions surprised you today? Christianity is all about new beginnings. Repentance, that very religious sounding word, means changing direction or turning around. Reconciliation is about making whole what once had been broken apart. Have you ever noticed that when I break the bread, I bring the two pieces back together? Communion, with God and with one another, is about healing what was broken, finding hope where hope was hard to find, and experiencing reconciliation when reconciliation was hard to imagine at all. The Canaanite woman shows what's possible. Joseph shows that it's never too late. After all, if Jesus can change his mind and his heart, we can as well.