

Proper 15 (20) - August 16, 2026

- Genesis 45:1-15 and Psalm 133 - Isaiah 56:1, 6-8 and Psalm 67 - Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

- Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

“Who’s in? Who’s out?”

1. Do you keep bad pictures of yourself on your cellphone, or do you delete them?
 - a. Back when I was taking pictures on my Minolta SLR on 35mm film, 24 or 36 pictures on each roll, it was more likely that I’d keep the good/bad/ugly
 - i. You had the pictures developed and printed. Very 20th century!
 - ii. if for no other reason that there was no way to recreate that picture opportunity that happened weeks or months earlier.
 - iii. If a group of friends were pictured and one had their eyes closed, or another was making a silly face or another had an unfortunate expression, well you kept the picture in spite of that.
 - iv. Maybe have a good laugh about it?
 - b. There would be an argument against keeping printed pictures of ourselves showing a former significant other after a messy breakup, right?
 - i. I’ve known people who had ripped a picture in half because they liked how they looked, but they needed to take out that “other person” from the picture.
 - c. These days? Take a picture on your phone, look at it: “Joe, dude, you look terrible! Can you just smile like a normal person?” or “Betty, you closed your eyes. Let’s try it again.”
 - i. And the picture is snapped again with better results. Worth keeping it.
 - ii. There is little reason why one would keep a bad picture of oneself.
Why do that?
 - d. From that perspective, when we read the gospel lesson, it is reasonable to ask why exactly did the compilers of the gospel stories decide to keep this one picture of Jesus in the album.
 - i. (And in fact, kept it in two albums --it also appears in Mark)
 - e. To offer some context, I will remind you that the many books of the Bible were initially and primarily a work of oral tradition passed down from one generation to another, eventually being gathered and preserved in writing.
 - i. That was certainly true of the gospels, as the stories we read here didn’t get put in writing the year or even the decade when they were happening.
 - ii. They were faithfully preserved by outstanding and reliable oral tradition methods, at times relying on separate streams of information
 - iii. (think of you and your college best friends recalling your college years each from their own perspective – but with much better memory not impaired by frat parties!)

- f. So all these stories of Jesus were shared via oral tradition, memorized and shared and memorized again. Eventually they made it in writing.
- 2. So why would our ancestors keep this particular picture of Jesus, this story, which, let's be honest, doesn't present Jesus in quite the rosy or polished perspective of other healing stories?
 - a. There are two basic questions we need to ask ourselves when we read this gospel passage (and let's try to address them without automatically "defending" Jesus)
 - b. Why did our ancestors make sure we kept this unflattering portrait of Jesus?
 - i. They could have chosen to soften it or make only the disciples to be the ones not coming out looking good.
 - 1. There seems to be a social and theological barrier here in this story: the woman asking for healing is not on the inside group.
 - 2. She is a woman (it was frowned upon for men to speak to a single women), and she's a Canaanite – an outsider to the Jewish people's perspective
 - 3. But we read elsewhere how Jesus broke boundaries like that all the time
 - 4. In this gospel of Matthew, Jesus had just healed the son of a Roman Centurion (not an Israelite) and two demon possessed non-Jewish men on the far side of the Lake of Galilee
 - 5. Though it's in another of the gospels (John), think about the story of Jesus speaking to the Samaritan woman at the well. He had a deep theological conversation with her. Only the disciples look impatient and rude
 - 6. But here (and other passages in Matthew) Jesus says that his message was meant for the Israelites, and then to everyone else.
 - ii. We need to remember that this gospel of Matthew has its storytelling geared specifically to the Jewish community in which Jesus grew up and taught.
 - 1. It centers its message to them, so for us to have this story here, means it is one of the needed breakthroughs widening the audience of God's message, showing the home crowd that the visiting team is not to be booed but recognized for their faith and strength
 - iii. So maybe this story is part of the larger effort to signal a transition in the message to express how God's reach of course goes beyond the Israelites, as the Psalm sings about
 - iv. Consider that at the end of Matthew Jesus would eventually send his disciples to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth

- v. Something else to consider is that there is precedent for keeping unflattering stories of biblical heroes of the faith to help us remember that all people are complex.
 - 1. Maybe Jesus is shown here in a relatable way to you and me.,
More human
 - 2. After all, here Jesus is implying she is like a dog begging for food at the table. That's not nice, Jesus! ,
 - 3. Of course Jesus eventually uses beyond-human power to heal the woman's daughter.
- vi. The story just sticks out like a sore thumb when we compare other descriptions of how Jesus lived.
- vii. We don't have the full answer (and trust me that biblical scholars have wrestled with this passage for centuries).
- c. Setting all that aside, what is supposed to be our takeaway from this story?
 - i. This I think is the more interesting question
 - ii. The story truly revolves not around Jesus, but around the courageous, faithful, and wise woman who is doing all in her power to have her daughter healed
 - iii. I could say that she was a cultural outsider, but if you notice Jesus traveled to her land!
 - iv. This wise mom goes at least three rounds with the disciples and then with Jesus, being proactive, insistent, loud, unwavering, quick-on-her-feet
 - v. And then we see it, in real time, the moment when things shift. Jesus changes his mind. He comes to agree with her. He praises her. He heals her daughter.
 - 1. And if you're scratching your head when I say that Jesus changed his mind, don't forget that there are other examples of Jesus showing more than one side to him (choosing and then chastising Peter)
 - 2. And we have stories in the Hebrew scriptures about God changing God's own mind (like after the flood and deciding never to destroy all creation again)
 - vi. Today's gospel went well out of the way, but it is still about Jesus breaking boundaries for the sake of God's love and mercy, looking quite human at it, even to the point of Jesus himself learning from the experience and making a shift.
 - vii. She changed Jesus, and he readily acknowledges her fully, praises her faith, and heals her daughter immediately.
- 3. Using what we learn here from Jesus and the Canaanite woman, it is a faithful exercise for us to consider where we are not at our best and we fail to welcome someone in our community or beyond it.

- a. It is OK to feel good about tearing down the barriers of injustice that we face
 - i. We seek to dismantle barriers of injustice based on hate and fear against people because of their race, their gender identity or sexual orientation, their nation of origin, and more
- b. But like Jesus shows us, there may be moments when we find ourselves less ready to tear down barriers
 - i. We may support people who are struggling to make ends meet, but maybe we harbor feelings of trust that they could manage the help we gave freely
 - ii. We may welcome people of different countries and cultures to be our neighbors, but maybe subconsciously we insist that they let go of customs or practices which we find off-putting
 - iii. We may encourage people to express their sexual identity fully, but still somehow want them maybe halfway in the closet
- c. One of the biggest takeaways from this story is that we look at those moments when we're not at our best, those pictures of ourselves we would rather have deleted or torn up, moments when we aren't consistently living up to the values of the Gospel as we understand them,
 - i. and then for us to ask God to help us keep changing, so we may truly appreciate and truly embrace all people no matter what human barriers were created at some point
- d. I would argue that the gospel ultimately is not about who's in and who's out. The gospel as Jesus preached it and lived it is that God wants all to be in, that God will go to great lengths to remind us we're children of God.
- 4. Maybe it's worth keeping an unflattering picture of ourselves in our mind's album, a picture where it's clear we have a ways to go to understand and live out the gospel. Not to beat ourselves up, but to remind us that we can make progress when we seek to be real, faithful, attentive, and open to learning from neighbors whose wisdom we hadn't yet recognized.

Reflection questions

1. Share a story of when you were graciously included into someone's circle / community / family.
2. What's your gut reaction to the interaction Jesus has with the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15: 21-28? Why is Jesus acting in this way towards her?
3. When have you found yourself unwilling or unable to get over stereotypes, learned prejudice, etc., but then you overcame that barrier?