

Sermon: August 16 2026 Matthew 15 Pent 12

I had to laugh this past week as I heard the story of a high school that had a persistent problem in its bathroom. It seems girls were putting on lipstick, then kissing the mirror in the girl's restroom leaving lip prints on the mirror. Apparently the girls at this high school thought this was marvelously funny. Please don't get any ideas! Despite all the principal and staff said and did, the problem went on and on and on. Finally, the principal had enough. She asked some of the girls at the root of the problem to join her in the bathroom with one of the school janitors, named Bob. The principal began: Girls, I know you think it is funny to leave lip prints on the mirror. But it is a lot of extra work for our Janitor, Bob. Bob can you please show these young women what you have to do each day to get rid of all those lipstick marks and clean the bathroom mirror?

Then Bob, the crusty old janitor, went to the nearest bathroom stall, took a toilet brush, wetted it in the toilet and proceeded to scrub the mirror with it. No lip prints ever appeared on school mirrors again. The problem was solved.

If only all our problems could be solved so easily.

Psalms 133 which we read earlier today, is a short, powerful tribute to the possibilities of genuine human community. Community even in the midst of difference. Community even in the midst of conflict. Psalm 133 is one of the Songs of Ascent. It is one of the songs people sang together as they were making their pilgrimage to the temple in Jerusalem. Back then people walked in large groups from their small hometowns to Jerusalem and as they walked, to break up the monotony, they would sing these psalms of ascent together: How good and

pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It beats singing 99 bottles of beer on the wall on your road trip out West.

We Christians still sing hymns and songs that talk about our common bond as members of the body of Christ. We sing about our common bond as members of the body of Christ even though we know there are lots of real divisions among us. You don't need me to tell you how divided our country seems lately. How angry. How anxious. The polarization we are experiencing is very real. But so too is our longing to live together in community just as Psalm 133 reminds us. Most of us yearn to heal those divisions in our country, in our community, in our own families.

Disagreements and conflict, arguments and differences are a part of the fabric of life and faith. And in a way, thank God for that. Thank God for those differences and even that conflict because it often, not always, but often from those conflicts, that we learn, we experience growth, we come to see ourselves and our world differently. Conflict can be profoundly productive when engaged constructively. For example in the first scripture lesson for today, Acts 15, it tells of a time when the early church was in deep conflict over a crucial matter—who is welcome inside the body of Christ. Acts 15 calls the conflict 'no small debate.' So church leaders called a meeting to consider the issue at hand, and then listening carefully to each other, listening in prayer to the moving of God's Spirit around them, they found a powerful, productive way forward. So one of the keys in overcoming conflict is listening, real, authentic listening.

The gospel lesson for today is also about conflict and listening and even more importantly for today, speaking. In the verses just prior to today's gospel lesson Jesus had been

engaged in debates with the Pharisees and teaching the disciples. Jesus then leaves them behind and tries to get some quiet time. The last time he tried that over 5000 people showed up hungry, and Jesus fed them all. The very next day Jesus goes up to a mountain to pray and just as he is catching his breath, a terrible storm came up and his disciples were caught in a storm, so Jesus again left his peace and quiet, walked out on the water and calms the storm. Those of you who have ever had a family vacation cut short by a crisis at work or home know how frustrating this can be.

So Jesus tries a third time to pray and rest and get centered before he goes out into the chaos of the world. And this time a persistent, distressed woman, just won't let Jesus go. Then as now, parents who are desperate to find help for their children, often ignore polite manners. So in this case the woman shouts at Jesus: *Have mercy on me, Lord! Have mercy on my daughter!* At first Jesus seems to ignore her—he doesn't answer her. She apparently already annoyed the disciples who want to send her away because she keeps shouting at them. When Jesus finally does answer her, his words sound harsh, even cruel: I was sent only the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Meaning you, a Canaanite woman, you are an outsider, you are not the focus on my ministry right now.

But this woman will not let go. She says: *Lord, help me.* Again, Jesus replies to the woman, even more sharply: *I cannot take children's food and throw it to the dogs*, which is how Jews and Canaanites referred to one another back then. They saw each other as a bunch of dogs. Jesus again reminds her, you are an outsider, you aren't a member of my followers. And yet this mother, as mothers are wont to do, she will not give up. She says: *I may be a dog, but even dogs get some of the crumbs that fall from the table.* Jesus listens to her and is so

impressed by her faith in him she responds by saying: *'Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you.'* And her daughter is healed.

Listening is one of the keys to healing and to getting through our real conflict. Listening is a key ingredient in human relationships as I remind every couple at their wedding service. In age of so many real differences we need to deeply listen to one another. How much different would Washington and Madison be if we locked the doors of Congress or the Legislature, ordered in Jimmy Johns, and our lawmakers had to actually eat with another, listen to another, and stay together until our real problems are addressed. The woman in today's gospel lesson teaches us not only to listen, but she also teaches us the importance of speaking out.

You see the kind of unity described in Psalm 133, How good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity!, doesn't just magically appear when people listen. It also requires people having the courage to speak, like that woman in the gospel lesson today. Winston Churchill once said: *Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak.* And courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.

Perhaps there is one more kind of courage we need today. Not just the courage to stand up and speak or the courage to listen, but the courage to stay at the table. The courage to stay in relationship when it would be so much easier to walk away. The courage to keep listening even when we are certain we already know what the other person will say. The courage to keep speaking even when our voice trembles and we wonder whether anyone is listening.

That high school principal found a way to solve the lipstick problem with a toilet brush and an unforgettable demonstration. If only every human conflict could be solved that easily.

Unfortunately, there is no toilet brush that can scrub away years of resentment, years of political division, years of racial prejudice and religious suspicion, years of conflict in our families. There is no clever trick that will suddenly make us one. The healing of community happens slowly. It happens whenever someone has the courage to sit down and listen. It happens whenever someone like the Canaanite woman has the courage to stand up and speak. And it happens when people decide that, despite their real differences they will remain together at the table long enough for grace to be able to do its work.

So perhaps these are the three faith practices we can take with us today.

First, listen this week for understanding. Listen not simply for a pause when you can jump in and make your own arguments. Instead listen for understanding.

Second, speak when someone needs an advocate. Speak when an injustice needs to be named. Speak when a person who has been pushed to the side needs someone to say, “You belong here at this table too.”

Listen for understanding, speak when someone needs an advocate, and third, stay at the table. Do not give up too quickly on one another. The unity Psalm 133 celebrates is not everyone thinking alike. It is people refusing to stop seeing one another as children of God. It is the body of Christ listening together, speaking truthfully, and trusting that the Holy Spirit is still present and can lead us somewhere none of us could reach alone.

“How good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity.” That kind of unity is not easy. But with courage, humility, faith and the grace of God, it is still possible. May it be so. Amen.

God of the prophet and the outsider, God of the wee children and the most aged among us, we come to you in prayer with so much on our minds, so much going on in our world. Hear us as we pause to pray.

Let us pray for the world and those in any need this day.

As we transition from summer mode to at least thinking about school and the fall, we pray for families, struggling to face it all. To face the busyness. To face the cost. To face the schedule. Be with struggling families. Be with teachers getting classrooms ready. Be with college students meeting new room mates, getting ready for classes. Be with our community as we rally together and provide needed supplies at Tool For School this week. Be with communities in cleaning up after storms. Be with us God, and help us to sense your presence. Lord in your mercy...

Let us pray for ourselves and those we love.

We give you thanks for time spent this week when 16 kids and a few adult helpers, in just a few hours, told the story of David and Goliath in our summer kids musical, the Rock Slinger. Like those kids we often feel powerless. Help us to regain our power. Call us again and again. Strengthen us to heal and bless, to serve and forgive. We pray for those who are sick and ill, especially your servants: Eric, Sam, Nathanael, Kathy, Ryan, Jeff, Diana, Nolan, Kelly, Dave, Lu. Lord in your mercy...

Let us give God our thanks and praise.

We give you thanks O God for all your good gifts. For the gift of ripe peaches and the ministry they empower here at church. Thank you. For the gift of young people and their

energy and silliness, that it may crack our hardened hearts, Thank you. For the gift of these last few weeks of summer, that we may savor them. Hear us as we pause and lift up our silent thanks and praise. Lord in your mercy....

Some of us are here with so much for which to give thanks. We thank you for the gift of love, whether it comes from a couple celebrating 50 or 7 years together, or whether it comes with Megan and Lucas who were married her yesterday. Whenever and wherever it happens, Lord increase your love in us.

Some of us are here because we are afraid. Like the Canaanite woman, grant us faith that you hear us, strengthen us that we may overcome our fear.

Some of us here because we are tired. Tired of the violence. Tired of rhetoric. We are just tired. Grant us your Spirit at work inside each of us that we may run the race of life and faith and not grow weary.

Be with all those who are mourning this day, especially in Barcelona, especially with the Kees family. Be with those who ask for healing