

NOT JUST US

Order of Service (bulletin)

<https://www.spiritofhope.ca/news-and-events>

Video (recorded live stream)

<https://www.youtube.com/@spiritofhopeunitedchurch791>

August 16, 2026

Pentecost 12

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left there and departed for the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, “Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed.” Jesus gave her no word of response. The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, “Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us.” Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, “My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel. She then prostrated herself before him with the plea, “Help me, Rabbi!” He answered, “But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.” “True, Rabbi,” she replied, “but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.” Jesus then said in reply, “Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass.” At that very moment her daughter was healed.

Romans 11:1-2a,29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected the chosen people? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, descended from Sarah and Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected the chosen people, who were foreknown long ago. ... For God's gift and call are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God and now have received mercy through Israel's disobedience, now they have become disobedient — since God wished to show you mercy — that they too may receive mercy. God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience in order to have mercy on everyone.



I have enjoyed pretty much every single Steven Spielberg movie I've ever seen. Close Encounters, Raiders, ET, Color Purple... didn't win any Oscars, but I loved it. Empire of the Sun, Schindler's List, Saving Private Ryan, A.I. ... Oh my gosh, what a sad ending. Minority Report, Catch Me If You Can, Lincoln. The reboot of Westside Story. And of course the movie Always... very cheesy, kind of sad but it was Patti's and my first date movie so it holds a special place in my heart.

I'm not sure about the greatness of Spielberg's most recent directorial effort, though... Disclosure Day, but it did get me thinking, which is always a sign of a good movie for me... if I'm still thinking about it after it's over. I'm not going to give you too many spoilers. But, it's about the government and the corporate world covering up past encounters with extraterrestrials starting all the way back at Roswell. And they've been doing experiments on these otherworldly visitors and keeping them captive and reverse engineering their technology. The movie is about the plot to try and expose all this to the public. Disclosure Day. It kind of felt incomplete to me in some

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

ways because they seem to be just really getting to the cool part right at the end as the aliens are about to speak to us for the first time and then the movie ends. I'm assuming that, all things going well, they would like a sequel... Disclosure Day 2, The Alien Speaks.

The basic message of Disclosure Day is not that different from a lot of alien or extraterrestrial movies: that we need to know that we are not alone. It's important that that message get out there because knowing **we're not alone** will change how we might deal with each other and the world in which we live and that knowledge is just something we should look for and not run away from.

United Church people recognize that phrase (we are not alone) because it anchors our formal United Church creed. It speaks into circumstances where people are maybe feeling set aside or maybe feeling isolated or maybe pushed outside the circle. *We are not alone* can be experienced as a promise for individuals who are maybe feeling that loneliness or outcastness. There's a very personal version of that. I am not alone. It's a hope. It's a promise.

But the plural version of it says something more. It implies a welcoming of others into a shared circle. The outcast and the lonely are made less outcast and less lonely by being part of something bigger than themselves. And... we are made better by expanding the inclusion within our circle. The plural invites us to think about more systemic walls that divide as well as how that individual might be welcomed in. It challenges not only on an individual level, but on a community level.

Both readings today challenge divisions that are justified by having one group seen as being over another and that that system needs to be maintained because it keeps the order the way we want it. In the case of the scripture readings today, it's using one's religious or their cultural identity as a basis for this competitive dividing.

Matthew... Jesus' encounter with a woman from the coastal Canaanite region. In the book of Mark, it says she's from Syro-Phoenicia, which would have been the Greco-Roman name for the area.

Let's be honest, it's not Jesus' best moment, is it? Or maybe it's one of Jesus' best moments.

Jesus, like all of us, is a person of his time and his place. Jesus lived at a time really of relative regional peace where he lived. I guess if you kind of ignore that, that peace was because they were occupied and controlled by the southern European-based empire who wouldn't want them squabbling and having fights with their nearby neighbors. So they kind of kept the peace by a greater threat of military action or force.

Judea and Galilee, the Israelite regions of the first century, are relatively small pieces of real estate. And as is true in the places of the ancient world, they had histories of kind of fluid borders. It's not like there is a strict line drawn in the sand or in the forest or on the field. It's fluid because every once in a while there are imperial desires to gain more territory. It went both ways. Judea and Galilee grew and shrank in their various forms over the centuries. Sometimes it's through literal invasion or attack. But sometimes it was simply migration and settlement and all of a sudden this area is more culturally or religiously or ethnically identified by the immigrant community. And those kind of fluid border skirmishes result in tenuous relations with neighbors. There's always a standoffish relationship. There's a bit of a mistrust... would assume the worst. When are they going to come for what I have?

And Jesus, like some in our time, was part of that **us first** ideology, that *us first* approach to international

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

relations, so to speak, although they wouldn't have called it that. Jesus, like some in our time, was very territorial, and it was often based on a religious or cultural identity.

The irony is... in that Matthew 15 passage that was read, Jesus is literally the foreign visitor in the story, he's the one out place. He is outside his home regions of Galilee and Judea. He's near Tyre and Sidon, which are cities on the Mediterranean coast in modern Lebanon. But still, even as this outsider, Jesus is very clear on his boundaries, so to speak.

Jesus and his disciples, who are the literal outsiders in that moment, could only see this Canaanite woman and her ill daughter as being outside of his circle of concern. *My work is only to the lost sheep of Israel. It isn't right to throw children's food to the dogs.* What a horrible thing to say. It wasn't just good enough to have a nationalistic defense. So Jesus had to use "my people are humans your people are dogs" language. How could you make it more clear that us two groups are not equal when we will say I am human and you are animal. I *am the one with resources and you are the scavenger.* As I said, not Jesus' best moment.

But then... there's a very human plea to Jesus' humanity and it shatters the cultural and religious and nationalistic expectations that gave rise to what was said before.

Jesus discarded the insult. And the daughter benefited from Jesus' skills.

And this is the last time in either Matthew or Mark where this story is first told that we see or hear Jesus make any reference to the lost sheep of Israel as being his limited mission. You don't hear Jesus make this distinction really much more between God's love and God's approach toward Israel and the nations, the Gentiles, the others. In fact, in Mark, the very next story is Jesus traveling through Galilee all the way to the other side of the Jordan River into the region of the ten cities, into the Decapolis, and healing people there just without question.

The woman changed Jesus. She by her own humanity reminded him that *the other* is not a dog.

And then you have the Romans passage: Paul writing to an early church right at the seat of the empire. It's an evolution of this exclusionist thinking within the Christian community where they were saying that we've got a purely religious exclusionism – that God has replaced Israel, that whole Old Testament story and basis for who we are and for whom Jesus grew up and the disciples grew up. God had replaced Israel with a new chosen people, those who follow Jesus. Even within early Christian churches like Rome, like Corinth, there was this uneasy relationship between those who came into the followers of Jesus through the Jewish tradition and those who came in from other traditions. Here Paul is saying "no" that division. And he points out that God has not picked one or the other, but that all people are to connect through God. Not through where they come from or what their previous expression of faith practice may have been, but they come to God simply because God is gracious and merciful. It's that theology: it's not us it's God: that we don't ensure our relationship with God, it is God who is relating to us. It implies that if worthiness was the criteria, then none of us would measure up. not the ancient Israelites, not the current Israelites, not the gentile church, not the mixed church.

Here's a weird thing. Jesus and Paul both ultimately reject this exclusivist hierarchical and demeaning and judgmental attitude. But the church that evolved from that story into Christianity today continues to have corners where this *us and them* ideology/theology is central. There's a long history of it being between different versions of Christianity. It's still prominent in places. There's still that nationalistic or exclusivist attitude out there in "the church". And it's finding a new prominence in secular society too. Some people are openly expressing that there are some (often those who are not from around here or who speak with an accent

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

different from ours) who are unworthy of the sameness that we enjoy. Five of the ten referendum questions that we get to vote on in 64 days. *And vote however you want, but know what you're voting for. I think that's the message, right?* Five of those ten questions are founded in an unworthiness of those who come to us from the outside. That's the basis of why they're a concern and what to do about this otherwise trajectory of sameness. Don't we want to hold that off? Again, *do your own research and figure that one out. You've got 64 days to do so.*

But I tell you, some of the online discourse is so abhorrent that it makes Jesus' dog comment seem tame. I got *into it* with a guy on a post over the weekend who obviously looked at my profile and saw that I preach and started wondering what might I be saying to my congregation. I wanted to send him a YouTube link to this morning, but I'll let him figure that out if he wants.

I don't know if it's made much news outside of the internet but apparently there was an Alberta Prosperity Project meeting where they were presenting their new draft constitution for the independent nation of Alberta and various people were standing up and talking about why certain things were in the constitution. One of the drafters of a part of that got up and made an abhorrent comment about people working in police forces... who *maybe wear religious head gear as part of their uniform* or that they *wear sandals from where they came from* or (and this is the wonderful phrase because it means nothing in any definition of any of the words) *they don't speak Canadian*. I usually just let those things kind of go and I don't want to engage because I don't want my algorithm to be too full of that stuff. But I **had** to react.

I actually went and found the video of the actual thing and asked: "Well, is this really what you're defending?" And then he changed subjects. Yeah. Well, that doesn't speak for our movement. Well, no. This is one of the people who drafted your constitution. That is your movement. Oh, but they disavowed him right away. Oh, yeah. Just like you disavowed the lawyer who allegedly stole money from First Nations. It's not so much those individuals because that's the difference between that individual and that collective thing. You can talk about how an individual is inappropriate and how an individual might need some growth in their thinking. But it's the company you keep.

The phrase that this person thought was an insult to me was that I had *suicidal empathy*. If that's the way I'm going to go, I'm good with it. If empathy is my downfall, bring it on. And you know who I think I'm in good company with? The guy hanging around Tyre and Sidon.

This all motivates me to not be as embarrassed as I am to be an Albertan sometimes. It motivates me to be an Albertan who lives out the grace and mercy that Paul was telling the Roman Christians about when they were trying to justify divisions.

This week, after a fair bit hounding on my part. Hounding, that's another dog reference. It's better than the one Jesus used. I've actually secured a meeting with my MLA for Leduc-Beaumont. My main focus is going to be on the fiasco that is the province's heartless and mindless changes to the Alberta disabilities programs. But I think I'll also chat a little bit about what he thinks about the various referenda questions.

I'm always at a loss. I am always at a loss to understand why some people are so concerned with worries over equality. They seem to believe that equal rights have to be viewed as special rights. What's special about wanting to be equal? If somebody else comes up, I'm not going to feel as high as I was. I might be in the same place, but I liked it when I had that superiority. You haven't changed. I think that's part of it. It always baffles my mind when someone says, "Well, they don't need special rights." I said, "Yeah, you're right."

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg

Divide and conquer has always been a technique with those in power to try and keep their advantage, but it's antithetical to the way of Jesus, which is compassion and grace and mercy and blinders around who is in and who is out.

A very brave and determined woman on the Lebanon coast taught Jesus that lesson.

Thanks be to God she did.

#5TLUS God Ever-Moving

Rev. T. Blaine Gregg