

12th Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 15, Year A
A Sermon Preached by Fr Ian M Delinger

on August 16, 2026

Genesis 45:1-15 / Psalm 133 / Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 / Matthew 15:21-28

*May God give us His blessing,
and may all the ends of the earth stand in awe of Him.*

Imagine that you are the descendant of a people whose land was violently stolen from them and many of those ancestors were murdered in genocide. Imagine living among those whom you can consider your oppressors, whose ancestors committed that genocide and stole your land. Now imagine that you are considered inferior simply because of your gender. And then imagine yourself having a child with severe ill mental health. Then imagine asking the one person you believe, truly believe, can help you ... and He says “No”. Imagine! You are desperate because you have been seeking help for years, to no avail. This was your one opportunity. What do you do? Do you turn and walk away? No! You persist!

That was precisely who the Canaanite woman was and the situation that she was in. Everything about her meant that she didn't belong. She didn't belong in the land that was once her ancestors'. She didn't belong in the company of men. She didn't belong in polite society because she had a possessed child. She belonged nowhere. And in the exchange with Jesus, because she persisted, and because she believed Him to be the Messiah by calling Him *Lord, Son of David*, she suddenly belonged. And that – belonging – is a central feature of the community of the followers of Christ.

As much as we could explore it the issue of *racism* that is explicit in this story, we should also explore the gift of *belonging* that comes through the meeting of Jesus and the Canaanite Woman. And for those of you who heard Jesus call her a “dog”, which was a common term of the Jews for the Canaanites at the time, you are right to be shocked. But let's focus on the outcome of this story.

Belonging is a central feature in Christianity. At the birth of the Church on the Day of Pentecost, we are told that those who received the Holy Spirit were:

Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, Cretans and Arabs.

That covered a lot of ethnicities in a vast geographic area! It was a moment of inclusion for those many communities which were separated by ethnicity, culture, history, language and many other things, and the only thing that they had in common is that they were under Roman occupation. Yet they were gathered together to receive the Holy Spirit and to be the first followers of Jesus after His Ascension. They belonged!

For the first 200 or 300 years of the early church, group identity was unimportant and almost non-existent. What each individual brought to this new community of the followers of Jesus was a far more important than where you came from or who you came from. This was a community that at its core was not only the love of God through Jesus Christ, but a place of *belonging* for all who chose to be a follower of Jesus.

So, for the Canaanite Woman, this moment where she suddenly belonged was a profound turning point in her life. And if we are to be Disciples of Jesus, if we are to follow Jesus, how can we be agents to help people belong?

In the 8 years that I was chaplain at the University of Chester's Warrington Campus, the community that gathered for our weekly worship service was quite interesting. Of all the students who regularly came to Chapel over the course of those 8 years, very few, if any, had prior Church experience. Very few, if any, were friends outside of Chapel. Yet, for some reason, they came to Chapel almost every week. I know it wasn't for the meal that was served afterward. They say students

gather around food, but there was plenty of food to go around, and they didn't need the food that I fed them. They came for community, and because it was a place where they felt they belonged.

When they came to worship, they were always on time. But they didn't sing the songs, they didn't say the Creed, and they didn't take Communion. Most of them would come every week for all 3 years that they were in university. Sure, it was a casual worship environment. And after worship we lounged around the couches and ate a simple meal together usually out of a crock pot. It wasn't like they were going to form a strong community and go conquer some social need out of their sense of being followers of Jesus. Yet, there they were!

Cal Poly and Cuesta start their new academic years this week and next. Going to university, particularly your first year, is daunting for most 18yos. Yes, there's anxiety about ability to do work. Yes, there's anxiety around managing your own schedule for the first time in your life. Yes, there's anxiety about being away from home. But I would venture to guess that the highest anxiety is: *Will I belong?*

It is well documented that the racial and economic demographics on the Cal Poly campus lend themselves to some students not ever feeling like they belong. Similarly, we know that life and work situations for Cuesta students mean that belonging is difficult to achieve on a commuter campus. Yet, tens of thousands of students will soon be arriving and commence their studies at both institutions, and every single one of them will be wondering if and how they belong.

From today's Gospel, we can extract our call to foster belonging in all who come through our doors. I sometimes say out loud that whenever you are with us – whether it's for a moment or a lifetime – you are part of the St Stephen's Family. Churches can be difficult places to feel like one belongs. Believe it or not, all congregations have cliques, they have gatekeepers, they have limited numbers of similar groupings of age, race, language, or interest. And all of the congregational development materials tell us that we need to be able to plug someone into an affinity group the moment they walk through the door. It's about belonging!

And we're working on that! At least we're talking about it. Those of us who are exploring the ministry of *Invite – Welcome – Connect*, we're exploring how to connect people who walk through our doors so they do get a sense of belonging in the shortest period of time possible. But there's also another initiative that I'm working on that is larger than the sense of belonging in this parish, and it is touching on the sense of belonging in the wider community.

For about 2 years now, I've been considering what it would be like to have a Spanish-language service on Sundays. One of the things that I have discovered is that our ethnic minority communities in the city are dispersed across many different neighborhoods. There's no concentration of ethnic minority communities here. A couple of weeks back, we had Samantha from the city offices come and explain to us the City-Wide Single Vote. And the reason our City Council is not districted in order to offer electoral representation is because of that specific fact: our ethnic minority populations are dispersed throughout the city. And City-Wide Single Vote is supposed to help address electoral representation across the ethnic minority communities.

Along with that, there are no gathering places for our ethnic minority communities. The gathering places in the city appeal mostly to white affluent people or college students. The one positive I can see from this dynamic within our city is that we have not created any ghettos. But, there is evidence that the ethnic minorities in this city don't really have a sense of belonging.

I commend you the Diversity Coalition of San Luis Obispo County's *SLO Equity Podcast*. Not just because I'm in one of the episodes, but because it gives you a really good look at the issues of belonging in our own community. When I was interviewed, I was asked quite a few questions about belonging. My overarching response was that everyone in this community should feel like they belong in San Luis Obispo City simply because they live here. And if they don't, it's up to all of us to figure out how to help them feel that they belong. Now that's a big task! It's

talked about on every citywide task force that I've been on in the last 10 years. But as the Church, we need to do our part.

And that's where the Spanish-language service comes in. I won't go into all the details of why I think we should have a Spanish-language service and the information I have gathered to make the bold claim that we will have a monthly Spanish-language service starting in January 2027. But, what I will say is that I want everyone to have the opportunity to know the love of God through Jesus Christ. My call to be a Disciple of Jesus comes in the form of ordained ministry, specifically to the priesthood. And therefore, my call at this moment is drawing me towards helping those who speak Spanish to know the love of God through Jesus Christ in this place.

San Luis Obispo is unique in many ways. We talk about it all the time. And one of those ways is that we are a city that has one of the lowest Spanish-speaking, Latino populations in the state! And regardless of what you think about immigration policy, and how good either ICE or the Governor are handling immigration, particularly across the southern border, is irrelevant. Because we are a people of faith, whose faith is following Jesus as the Messiah. Our discipleship looks beyond national borders, language, skin color, gender, ability, and much more. Jesus demonstrated that through His own humility in today's Gospel story by including the Canaanite Woman in His ministry. He was very clear that His mission was to the lost people of Israel, to the Jews. Yet she made Him realize that His mission was actually to *everyone* who believed Him to be the Messiah, regardless of who they were.

So, we are called to go and do likewise! We are to help people belong to the Body of Christ.

Oh how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity!

The Psalm underscores the inclusion and belonging that we read about in today's Gospel. And where there is and has been division and pain, our Old Testament lesson calls us to forgiveness and repentance.

Fostering a sense of belonging within a congregation isn't just the priest's job. Actually, the priest probably has the least to do with that. Because it's among you whom a newcomer will sit, to whom a newcomer will look for questions, and by whom a newcomer will be led to Coffee Hour. And while sense of belonging goes beyond Sunday morning, it starts with Sunday morning. We have demonstrated and been told over and over again that we are a welcoming congregation. That is wonderful to hear, and you may have read the story that I wrote for The Witness on the subject. So, we need to make sure we know how to foster a sense of belonging, and not just foster it, but ensure that all people feel that they belong. Let's not have anyone rebuke us, as the Canaanite Woman did to Jesus, for us to understand their need or desire to belong. We can't behave as the elitist Disciples do in today's Gospel.

As much as we are here for our own spiritual journey and deepening our faith in God through Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, we are called to be in community with one another. And as a community, we need to feel and know that we belong. And so, as we gather as the Body of Christ in this place, let us not only say, but *live* lives that shout:

*Whoever you are, and wherever you are on your spiritual journey,
St Stephen's is a place where you belong.*