

20th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Matthew 15:10-28; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32.

Genesis 45:1-15 is the denouement of the Joseph account, the event that brings that story to both its apex and psychological conclusion! In this story, Joseph reveals to his brothers that this man with whom they have been dealing over their last several trips to Egypt and whom they perceive as being the second most powerful man in Egypt and the king's primary advisor ("father to Pharaoh") is, in reality, their brother Joseph. More than twenty years earlier, they had sold Joseph into slavery to some traders and had no idea what had happened to him, but assumed that he was either a slave somewhere or dead. Now they discover that he is the vizier of Egypt! The shock would even be greater to Jacob who believed that his son was dead! But now the brothers discover that this mighty ruler is indeed the brother they betrayed and sold into slavery. How they must have trembled at the news!

There are three notable moments in this story. The first is Joseph's inquiry – almost a longing inquiry – after his father. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (vs. 3) The Hebrew is particularly poignant. This is no intellectual question. There is an urgency, a sense of great hope, but also the fear that the news will be bad that permeates this question. "Is my father alive? Please – please don't tell me that he is dead! I want to see my father again!" It is almost as if this great ruler, seated in the glory of the Egyptian court and upon a throne, is a little boy all over again, hoping against hope that his father will still be alive! It is such a poignant moment in the story!

Of course, the news is good. His father is indeed alive, and is in the best of health for a person of his advanced years. What relief must have flowed through Joseph. He would get to see his daddy again!

The second notable moment is Joseph's interpretation of his sale into slavery. He had once been the brash boy who offended his father and alienated his brothers with his description of dreams of them bowing down to him as their superior. Now he had become the emotionally and spiritually mature person who could both freely forgive his brothers for what they had done and see the hand of God in it for a greater good. "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves," Joseph said to his brothers, "because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (vss. 5-8).

Joseph puts the matter even more precisely later on when he states, "Even though you intended it to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (50:20). It was petty jealousy and anger that prompted the brothers to do what they did. But there was a far greater plan of God's, in which God was acting even through petty jealousy to save Jacob's family, the Hebrew clan, the Egyptian people, and all the tribes of the mid-East from a famine that would otherwise have destroyed them all. "All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). But all things worked together, in this case, not only for

all those who loved (or even knew) Yahweh, but for an entire populace of many nations, whomever they might have worshipped.

This did not excuse either the sin of Joseph's brothers in putting their jealousy into action or of Joseph's naiveté in sharing this dream. Joseph had already paid through his slavery and imprisonment for his lack of human understanding, and had grown in maturity as a result. And his brothers had seen the grief they had brought upon their father, and the trouble they brought upon themselves in their negotiations with this strange Egyptian overlord with whom they were forced to deal. And their responsible action in regards to their youngest brother Benjamin exhibited to Joseph that they had more than learned their lesson because of the pain they had created by their actions regarding Joseph. There was room aplenty for repentance on all their parts.

But, nonetheless, the primary truth with which Joseph was dealing in this account was the recognition that God overrules even evil intentions and uses such foolishness to the higher good of all. A people have been saved, a region rescued from famine, and Joseph's family restored to him because God took the most evil intentions and used it for good!

The principle lying behind the story and its primary truth is one of the essential principles of belief in the sovereignty of God. That principle is that God achieves God's *intentions* through both human and divine *action*, not human *motives*. That is, God has created and continues to create intentions for this world, molding a world according to God's design. In this specific instance, that intention included the well-being of all the peoples of the near East during what would be a devastating famine. Further, God uses human beings as integral parts of the accomplishing of that plan, and does so through their actions. Thus, it was God's intentions to accomplish the objective of saving the peoples of the near East from starvation through the intervention of Joseph as vizier of Egypt, organizing food production and distribution.

Even further, God used the animosity and jealousy of Joseph's brothers to capture him and to sell him into slavery so that eventually, he would arrive in Egypt, be sold to a master who would eventually jail him so that he could be discovered by Pharaoh and exalted to his position as vizier. It is not necessary, in God's use of the actions of humans, for those actions to be motivated by pure motives. They can be motivated by the most evil of intentions. Thus, in the Joseph account, the brothers were motivated by jealousy and hatred, and acted only to hurt Joseph and to remove him from them (even the impact this would have on their father wasn't of sufficient consequence for them to be diverted from their action). But God was finally concerned with the action, not the motive. The principle, therefore, is that God uses human action despite its motives, in order to bring about God's intentions.

The third notable moment of this story was the expectation of the reunion that would happen when Joseph's father and the larger clan joined Israel's sons in Egypt. "You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here". Thus it was that the clan of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob moved into the richest area of Egypt, the delta area named Goshen, and were welcomed there by the Pharaoh himself. And Joseph was reunited with his entire family once again!

Psalm 133 and Psalm 134 are meant to be read together, because they belong together. Although they are clearly two distinct poems, they share a common understanding that life consists primarily of relationships.

Psalm 133 begins with well-known lines: “How very good it is when kindred live together in unity. It is like the precious oil on the head, running down the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes. It is like the dew of Hermon which falls on the mountains of Zion. For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore” (Psalm 133:1-3).

Psalm 134 is equally short, but places its emphasis on the worship of God. “Come, bless the Lord, all you servants of the Lord, who stand by night in the house of the Lord. Lift up your hands to the holy place, and bless the Lord. May the Lord, maker of heaven and earth, bless you from Zion” (134:1-3).

The two psalms together magnificently present the relationality of God. Together, they stress that meaning, purpose and satisfaction in life is found in a concentration upon relationships. Psalm 133 stresses the Godliness of fostering our relationships with each other – of living in unity. Psalm 134 features the importance of deepening our relationship with God – in this psalm by praying to God in his Temple and blessing God. Both psalms are emphasizing the central element of human life. Augustine put it best when he wrote, “Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee” (*The Confessions of St. Augustine*, p. 1). In a profound sense, Psalm 133 also reminds us that “God has made us for each other, and our heart is restless, until it repose in each other”. It takes both love of God and love of people to truly live into shalom. Both statements are equally true and are, in fact, true to each other – two sides of the same coin. Life is about relationality – and little else matters than our relationship with God and each other!

In these two psalms, meant to lie in juxtaposition with each other, is the foundation of the biblical concept of the shalom community. The shalom community is, in the final analysis, not an idea nor simply a political or economic practice (although it includes all three). It is a relationship – being at-one with God and with humanity, as we seek through such love to live out justice and equity in the world.

Matthew 15:10-28 are two stories. But they are actually one story – or better put, two contrasting stories developing one truth!

In the first story, Jesus says to the crowd, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, for it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles” (15:11). What prompted that public statement by Jesus was his earlier exposure of how Israel’s elite avoided the responsible caring for their own aged parents by pledging their wealth to the Temple so that their needy parents couldn’t get legal access to it. Angry at such hypocrisy, Jesus attacks the Pharisees’ commitment to the obedience of the minutia of the Law (in this case, dietary requirements) rather than to recognize the source of their own evil (15:1-6).

That statement, of course, offends the Pharisees because it goes directly against all the dietary rules of the Law of Moses. Jesus' disciples tell him how much his comment offended the Pharisees. He takes umbrage at their correction and in essence replies, "Don't become concerned with meeting the expectations of the Pharisees. They are blind guides of the blind, pressing an agenda that benefits them but nobody else (even their own parents). Don't have anything to do with such hypocrites!"

Later, Peter asks for a further explanation of what Jesus meant. Jesus replies with the obvious: "Whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer. But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander" (vss. 17-18).

In the second story, Jesus has traveled to a border area of Jewish Galilee, hard against Gentile territory. A Canaanite woman sees Jesus and comes to him, shouting loudly, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." Overwhelmed by her loud noise and her confrontational presence, the disciples ask Jesus to send her away.

Jesus reacts to the woman in a way most of us would not expect. Rather than being receptive and responsive to her, he tells her that he will not heal her child because "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel". However, the woman will not accept rejection. She continues her verbal assault of Jesus, begging for his intervention in her daughter's madness.

Jesus replies to her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." The woman immediately responds, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table". And Jesus, moved by her response, says to her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And Matthew tells us, "And her daughter was healed instantly" (vs. 28).

These two stories seem to be two very distinct events. Yet Matthew has clear intentions in placing them next to each other, even though the two events occur miles (and therefore, likely, days) apart. The common nature of these two stories can be stated in one sentence. People are more important than principles!

In the first story, the people are poor elderly parents, uncared for by their elite children who prefer to get maximum credit for their commitment to the Temple rather than provide support to their parents. By declaring their wealth as "given to God" (Korban), the Pharisees and others could accomplish two things. First, they could get public credit for their love of God and God's Temple, thus increasing their credibility among the people. Second, since that estate would not have to be given to the Temple until after their death, they had both free rein to use that money as they presently chose and would be free from paying any taxes on it either to Rome or to the Jewish political system. So they would get the full use of their estate so that they could live as luxuriously as they wished at the expense of their parents or children while they received the high praise of the people for their generosity.

But people are more important than principles! And poor elderly parents are more important than any regulation of the Law of Moses that deprives them of the support adult children should

assume toward their aged parents. Thus, Jesus, in anger over such injustice, declares, “It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles”. Jesus is not so much attacking the dietary laws here as he is attacking the hypocrisy and greed of the elite that would use laws to deprive the care of parents that was at the very heart of Israel’s moral law (Exodus 20:12). He simply uses the dietary laws as an illustration that one must much more fear the evil intent that is within us all that moves from instinct or thought into action than one must fear so-called “unclean” foods that we might eat. After all, anything that we eat, clean or unclean, simply passes through us and is evacuated – and that is the end of that! But within us all are the capacity for acting out evil intentions, whether they be murder, sexual infidelities, theft, lying, slander, or whatever they might be. So be afraid – be very afraid of the evil that lies deep inside your soul that rises to the surface and begins being acted out in your life – like greedy Pharisees do when they declare their wealth given to God and thus use it as they please while forcing their aged parents into destitution.

In the second story, Jesus is faced with a conundrum. The principle he has espoused so strongly in his first story is that people are more important than principles. But in the second story, Jesus has to deal with his own tendency to make the principles by which he is conducting his ministry the center of that ministry, and not the need of people immediately facing him!

It is clear from this story, as well as other stories in the Gospel of Matthew, that Jesus believed that the gospel of the coming of the kingdom of God had to come to Jews before it could come to Gentiles. That good news was initially intended for God’s chosen people who had sought to be faithful to God’s call to them down through the centuries. But in this story, Jesus is faced with a woman – a thoroughly determined, uncompromising Gentile woman who would not let him go until he blessed her daughter. What, then, should he do?

Jesus first seeks to not accede to the woman’s request. He is kindly toward her, but not receptive to her appeal. He is caught between the insistence of this woman and the reaction of the disciples who find her far too shrill and confrontational. And he seeks to explain his position with the words, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel”. But she will not take “no” for an answer.

Her simple words *after* Jesus explains his position is “Lord, help me”. She is really saying, “Look, what you are saying is in direct opposition to what you say your mission is. You say your mission is to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. But in all your actions, and in fact your attack on the Pharisees for their treatment of their aged parents, you are declaring that people are more important than program – even when that mission is the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Well, I’m a person. And my daughter is a person. And we may be Gentiles. But we need help. And if what you say is true – that people are more important than principle – then you need to put aside your principle that you have come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel, and deal with *this* person by healing my child!”

Jesus is moved by her words. But he isn’t entirely ready to give up yet. So he states his sense of mission another way. “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

The real nuance of what Jesus is saying in this statement is revealed by the specific word Jesus uses which is translated “dogs”. He uses the Greek *kynarion*, not *kyon*. A *kyon* was a dog of the streets, a wild or semi-tamed dog running around the town and scavenging for food; it was, in essence, an insulting term for a Jew to use, comparable to our “cur”. But Jesus uses the word *kynarion*. This is a “house dog”, a dog that is a pet to a family and is highly valued by its owners. It was never permitted outside the house and central courtyard. A household’s *kynarion* would be fed its own meal but it would also sit under the table during each meal and would gobble up any scraps that might fall from that table. If Jesus were talking about the gospel not being shared by anyone but Jews, why would he have used *kynarion* (and all that such usage implies) and not *kyon*? Was Jesus intentionally weakening his position in response to the desperation of this woman? Was his care for her as a person winning out over his sense of mission?

The woman, sensing Jesus’ equivocation, presses her advantage. She senses that the Gentiles are no longer outside in the street in Jesus’ viewpoint; he has let them into the house! In a moment, he could let them eat under the table. Jesus hadn’t said, “No, I will not heal you.” Jesus hadn’t said, “Go away; stop bothering us” (although his disciples would). Instead, she sees the direction in which Jesus’ words are taking him, and they are taking him toward her! So the woman retorts with her most powerful statement.

“Yes, Lord, even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table!” Martin Luther exulted in her response. He wrote, “Isn’t that a masterpiece (of a response)? She traps Christ in His own words. How can Christ possibly get out of this now?” (G. Friedrich, ed., *Auslegungen der Reformatoren*, p. 81). The “yes” she uses actually means “precisely!” This woman is saying to Jesus, “Yes, precisely! And do you know what the implications are of what you have just said? As a Gentile, I may be a “house-dog” to you. But I am *your* dog, the household pet you love so much. And you want to take care of your household pet, don’t you? So feed me with the crumbs of compassion that can fall from your table, and heal my daughter!”

Jesus’ response is emphatic in the Greek. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish!” A translation that would better capture the spirit of Jesus’ words is, “Women, your faith is terrific!” This is the kind of faith Jesus wants to see! This is the kind of pluck that Jesus wants in his followers! She may be a Gentile, coming into Jesus’ redemptive work out of proper sequence. But who cares? What a gem this woman is! She’s the kind of disciple Jesus wants on his team! “Let your daughter be healed to the extent of your faith!” And that faith is total. Therefore, “her daughter was healed instantly” (vs. 28)!

But it was more than the daughter who was healed. All the leading characters of this story were made whole. The daughter was freed from her demons, the mother from her agony and Jesus from his own agenda! And why? Because people are more important than principles!

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 continues the exploration by Paul of the unique role of the Jews in the economy of God. Romans 9:1 through 11:36 deal with the question, “What is God seeking to accomplish through history, particularly in the light of the Jewish people who have rejected Jesus as Messiah – those who had been God’s chosen but have now become those rejecting Jesus?”

In Romans 9 through 11, Paul presented four arguments regarding unbelieving Jews. He first argued that simply because a majority of the Jews and the Jewish ecclesiastical and political systems had chosen to reject Jesus as the Messiah didn't mean that all Jews had rejected the Christ. After all, Paul argues, he is a Jew, all the apostles are Jews, the majority of the church is Jewish, and Jesus himself was a Jew! The very existence of these Jewish Christians is testimony to God's election of a saving remnant within Israel (Rom. 9:6-29). We examined that argument in our Epistle lesson two Sundays ago.

Second, the reason for Israel's corporate rejection of the gospel was their blind commitment to their legalistic understanding of God's intent for redeeming the world. They chose obedience to the minutia of the Law as the way to demand God's acceptance rather than embracing the grace of God given to them through Christ (9:30-10:21). This was Paul's argument we examined in last Sunday's Epistle lesson.

But in today's lesson, we now look at the third and fourth arguments that Paul presents regarding unbelieving Jews. The third argument is stated in Romans 11:1-2a and developed through verse 12. This scripture states, "I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew".

Paul's argument in Romans 11:1-12 is that, although Israel corporately rejected the gospel, God has not rejected them. Rather, it was that their rejection of Christ opened the way for a much larger embrace of Christ. In the words of Genesis 50:20, "Even though you intended to do harm, God intended it for good"!

Paul's main argument here is that it was Israel's corporate rejection of the saving grace of God that opened the way for Gentiles to embrace the gospel, and thus become a part of that saving remnant of the Jewish Christians of the earliest church. If the Jews had embraced Jesus wholeheartedly, then the gospel would have remained a Jewish gospel. Because of the wholehearted embrace of Christianity by Judaism, the church would have never been motivated to take their gospel to the Gentile world. So by allowing this rejection to occur on the part of God's people, God actually brought about an expansion of the gospel throughout the entire Gentile world (11:1-12).

But Paul then moves on to his fourth argument. He states, "The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so the Jews have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all" (11:29-32).

No one has a corner on disobedience, Paul argues. And only God has a corner on mercy! Both Jews and Gentiles have been disobedient to the call and gifts of God. But God, in his mercy, has extended such mercy in ways we do not begin to comprehend

Paul's argument is magnificent here. Jew and Gentile are united in two ways, he suggests. First, both they and us reject the call of God, act for our own self-preservation despite the harm that brings to others, and choose the path that will lead to either the flaunting of or acquiescence to oppression, exploitation and control out of our lust for power, greed and domination. We are all miserable sinners! Second, God shows mercy to us all – even though we don't deserve it. So both Jew and Gentile are united in our disobedience and in God's mercy.

Just consider the wisdom, love and sovereignty of God, Paul argues! It was the disobedience of the Jews that led to God's mercy coming to the Gentiles. And it has been the mercy of God coming to the Gentiles that leads to the reception of mercy by the Jew! That is, one hand washes the other! And without the other, there would be no washing of one's hand! Both Jew and Gentile are necessary to each other for the salvation of the world. One can't do without the other. So, in the final analysis, there is no difference between Jew and Gentile! Both Jew and Gentile have sinned (3:23). And even though we don't deserve it, God has mercy on us both (1:16, 11:29-32)!

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