

Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133, Matthew 15:10-28  
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September 17, 2014

It has been 13 years since Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, smeared blood on his multi-colored coat and told their father, Jacob, that he was killed by wild animals. In the meantime, Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, the chief of the guards for Pharaoh. Joseph proved so capable that within a short time he was in charge of Potiphar's household.

The Bible says Joseph was quite handsome, and he attracted the attention of Potiphar's wife. Several times she asked Joseph to "lie with her," and every time Joseph refused out of his loyalty to Potiphar. Once she grabbed Joseph by his cloak and tried to drag him into her bedroom. Joseph ran out of the house and Potiphar's wife was left holding his outer garment. Having her advances rebuffed once too often, she cried out that Joseph had tried to seduce her, and his shirt was proof he was trying to undress in her room. Potiphar had him thrown in the clink where he remained for a few years.

While imprisoned, Joseph correctly interpreted his cell mates' dreams. When Pharaoh then had a dream that all the magicians in Egypt could not interpret, word came to him that a man in prison might help. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh, and he told him that his dream meant Egypt would experience seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought and famine. For his expertise, Joseph was placed in charge of overseeing the production and storage of enough food in the seven good years to provide during the seven lean years, which he did. In fact, Joseph became the second most important person in Egypt after Pharaoh himself.

When the famine caused Jacob and his family to suffer back in Canaan, Jacob sent the same 10 sons who sold Joseph to Egypt to buy grain. Once in Egypt, they had to deal with Joseph. He recognized them, but they didn't recognize their brother. Finally, Joseph could no longer keep his identity from his brothers, and in this poignant reading today, he cries loudly with tears of joy as he reveals who he is. Remarkably he is not bitter but is able to discern that God had used what was clearly evil for the good of his family.

As we have seen throughout these Genesis stories, God is always in the background powerfully guiding the circumstances of far less than perfect people to accomplish unimaginably positive outcomes. The lessons of God's faithfulness shine through Genesis and all the books in the Bible so we will not lose our faith in God's trustworthiness regardless of our own or other's behavior.

Strong faith is exemplified in an unlikely candidate, a Canaanite woman, in the gospel reading today. This is the only instance in Matthew's gospel where anyone, Jew or Gentile, is praised by Jesus for having "great faith." We hear Jesus more often say to his disciples and others in the Jewish community, "O you, of little faith."

Of course in this remarkable little vignette, Jesus shows a side of himself that isn't all that wonderful, especially in light of his just having told the Pharisees to watch what comes from their mouths. He initially turns a deaf ear to her shouting and then calls her a dog, on the grounds that she isn't Jewish. The woman, bless her, is neither offended by Jesus' derisive remark nor deterred from her insistence on getting Jesus' help for her daughter.

I went to see the Redskins practice with the Patriots week before last. I waited for hours in a particular corner of the practice fields with other New England fans because that's where the Patriots players would come to give autographs after the practice session was over. I wanted Tom Brady's autograph, but he never came near us. Other fans around me screamed and clamored for autographs from any of the few players that ventured near. I wasn't going to act like a crazed lunatic for just any autograph so I came away empty. If Tom had come near, who knows how I might have carried on?

When it came to wanting healing for a daughter or a son in my case, I hope I would gladly lose my dignity or sacrifice my pride as the Canaanite woman did. She did what it took. She even sparred with Jesus using the type of argumentative style that was highly admired by Jewish culture. She took Jesus on. She went toe to toe with him even though she was a woman and an outsider. And, obviously, Jesus loved her spunk and tenacity. Never had he seen such doggedness for what he alone could provide.

Furthermore, it appears this woman taught the Son of God something that day. He learned that he was sent to more than just the lost sheep of Israel, the Jews. That Jesus could and was still learning is really something – yet another reason to admire him and follow him.

Who do we still learn from? Who has the wisdom to change us for the better? Usually we seek advice from experts or highly trained professionals. Jesus called the highly trained professionals in his day "blind guides." Juanita, in her honesty, is certainly one of my teachers. Occasionally she hits a nerve, but that's only because she's right.

People least like us may also have the ability to teach us important life lessons because they approach it quite differently than we do. How much can we learn from someone whom we always agree with? Aren't they just telling us what we want to hear? Where's the new or other perspective in that?

We usually avoid the other or those least like us for a variety of reasons. Thus we can't learn from them. In Jesus' day they were called the poor, untouchables, Samaritans, Gentiles, aliens, sinners or tax collectors. They would make a good Jew unclean by close contact. Jesus broke all those rules and purposely made contact with those considered to be problem people – the ones we blame the world's ills on. He wanted them to know that God loved them, too. Here he does the same with, perhaps for him, the greatest outsider of all, not because he wanted to but because she would not allow him to ignore her. He'll be forever changed by the encounter. She has her daughter back and a story to tell far and wide of magnanimous love extended from a Jewish holy man. There was some healing between Jews and Gentiles that day.

Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker Movement in the slums of New York City and elsewhere, was having a conversation with a down and out man who was either drunk or mentally ill while a newspaper reporter waited to interview her. He grew more and more impatient as this pitiful creature had Dorothy's attention instead of his. Dorothy finally turned to the reporter and asked, "Are you waiting to speak to one of us?" Obviously Dorothy didn't think she was more important than the troubled man she had been talking with.

Wouldn't it be nice if we all had such high regard for others and especially those least like us. In the letter of James, he writes, "...show partiality to no one...." (James 2:1) He goes on to warn us not to treat a rich man any different than a poor man. We can be the source of God's magnanimous love that heals rifts between people as well.

Heidi Husted wrote the following regarding this story of the Canaanite woman, "This becomes the day the gospel of Jesus Christ goes to the dogs." Lest we be offended by that statement, we need to remember we "Gentiles" were once some of those dogs ourselves. AMEN.