

## Sermon for Sunday, August 20 2023 Who is my Family?

After the dysfunction of the story of Abraham and his immediate family, a family that I've preached about in prior weeks, we finally get a story of restoration of relationship in our Old Testament reading today.

Jacob's son Joseph, now Pharaoh's aide-de-camp, reveals himself to be the sibling that his brothers had sold into slavery. Remarkably he seems to bear no ill will toward them. And they are shocked and gratified that he is generous and loving toward them. The family of Jacob, including this lost son, is brought together even though Joseph serves the Pharaoh, who is most definitely not Jewish. They should consider him divorced from the one true God because he serves Pharaoh, but he is acting in a way more consistent with God's law than they had in the past. The definition of family is shifted in a fundamental way, broadening the view of who is in and who is out.

The Gospel also talks about the nature of family, albeit in a more indirect way.

Jesus is once again in the borderlands, of Canaanite country, seeking a safe space to gather his wits about him after the last go-round with the pharisees. And just like any of us who have gone away for a break after something difficult has occurred in our lives, we are startled and a bit aggravated when someone disturbs our time of rest.

So it is, when Jesus is set upon by a solitary woman who is clearly a Canaanite, not a Jew, and who is pleading for help for her sick daughter.

This is a test of just how wide God's mercy is, as the old hymn says.

There are so many reasons Jesus should not engage with the woman.

First, she's not a Jew. Canaanites were ancient foes of Israel. The Gospel of Mark more aptly names her Syro-Phoenician, as she would have been identified in Jesus' time. It's her nationality in the political environment of that day. But for Matthew, it's important that she is not only from a different political entity, Syro-Phoenicia, she is from a part of the world and from people who were sworn enemies of the Jews. Back in the day, these had been the sort of people who worshipped idols and such. Remember that Matthew is writing his gospel to the Jewish followers of Christ who had been dispersed to other parts of the Mediterranean, particularly those in Antioch, in current-day Syria. And he wants to stress Jesus' Jewishness and the utter and total "otherness" of this woman. Jesus is following the Torah by ignoring her at first.

Second, she's a woman who has traveled to him alone, without an accompanying man. It would be a violation of the laws of Torah for him to interact with her. Men were supposed to interact with their wives and female relatives, but not with other females. It's rather like some of the strictness about female rights in some of the Islamic countries, where women can't drive, nor can they go anywhere without a male chaperone. The Muslim faith didn't invent that – they simply copied it from Torah. And once again, Jesus is following the Torah by ignoring her at first.

Third, it is politically dangerous for him to engage with someone who might make him look even more unsavory to the traditional Jewish leaders in Jerusalem. The Pharisees haven't stopped complaining that Jesus hangs out with all sorts of bad people and sometimes his disciples forget to wash up around those folks, that he is a heretic.

And Jesus, of course, knows all this. He knows how tenuous his position is these days. He knows how his story will end.

And yet this persistent woman desperately wants him to help her daughter. It seems word of his healing has reached even into Tyre and Sidon.

And even after the disciples try to shoo her off, she gets right into Jesus' face to challenge him.

He says "I'm not supposed to help you. In fact, I'm not supposed to even talk to you. Go away. I was sent only to help the lost sheep of the house of Israel"

He's said this before. Remember when he instructs the disciples in Matthew 5: 5-6? "These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: 'Do not go onto the road of the Gentiles or enter any town of the Samaritans. Go rather to the lost sheep of Israel.'"

His mission is to his family, the family of the Jews. She isn't eligible for his help.

And still she believes he can help her daughter, so she kneels directly in front of him. She's fearless because she is desperate. She knows full well that he's not suppose to interact with her. But still she asks for his help. He says something that seems painfully harsh to us, but would resonate with the Antiochan Jews of the diaspora, who know the laws of Torah well. "It isn't fair to give bread to dogs." Dogs were unclean animals to Jews at that time. She knows what he means. "You're unclean. You're not part of my family. You're not part of my mission."

Some people, hearing that, would get up off their knees and walk away. But this woman, angry and hurt now, says something different, something sarcastic, something that shocks everyone, including us. "Yes, but even the dogs get the crumbs that fall off the master's table."

It is evident that her faith that Jesus can help her has given her the courage to say this thing. Arguing with Jesus! And yet her words compel him to respond. And suddenly the definition of who is his family, who are his co-religionists, whom he is supposed to work with, those definitions all fall away in the face of this shatterproof faith (more than he's seen from many of the Jews) that Jesus can help her daughter.

And his heart bursts with love and care for this woman who, a few moments ago, seemed to him someone to be avoided at all costs. "Woman, your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you wish."

Your faith is great. It is done.

Sometimes when I preach on this passage I make the point that the only person who ever bested Jesus in a theological argument was a non-Jewish woman, which is quite a surprising thing.

But today I'm really taken with the idea that there are times, over and over again, when the family of God is shown to be more expansive than we may have originally thought. There are times when the need to help others who do not necessarily believe as we do outstrips our desire to only take care of our own. Times when the mission is so important that we cannot do anything but love and help. Jesus understood that. In the early days of the church, one of the first converts was a Roman Centurion, Cornelius, and despite the fact that he was part of the institution that oppressed the early Christian church, he was indeed baptized by Saint Peter. It was something that surprised and disturbed some among the followers of Christ, and yet Paul made it his particular mission to convert Gentiles. The family grew.

This world that we live in is full of people who aren't like us. And yet each is a descendant of Adam and Eve. We are all part of the family of God, and Jesus touches each of them in some fashion. Out of the dysfunction of our current world, out of the struggles between who has power and who does not, out of the battles for resources, for space, for food, there is a common family. Jesus taught us how to expand our definition of family, and that is the grace that we are given to do.

It isn't easy.

We may need a little time to process this, as Joseph did when he realized his brothers didn't recognize him when they first got to Egypt. We may need to adjust to the notion that this expanded family seems to break rules that we were taught when we were young, to take care of our own, to do the things that are most comfortable for us, and such.

But the faith that Jesus lauded, the tears that Joseph's brothers shed when they realized that Joseph had pity on their plight and was going to help them, the relief that the Canaanite woman felt, all those moments can be ours.

If we are willing to expand our family in new ways. To welcome them, to listen to their stories, to imagine how we can be the church in fresh ways that recognize the gifts and the challenges of new family members.

It is hard, and yet it is not hard. Get down on your knees and ask Jesus to help you do this thing. He expanded his definition of family, and we can as well.

Amen.