

**11 Pentecost  
August 16, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

During these summer months we've heard stories about our Abrahamic tradition from the Book of Genesis ... stories about Abraham & Sarah, Isaac & Rebecca and their sons Esau and Jacob, and lately about Jacob's family ... especially his son Joseph. Jacob had eleven sons ... their mothers were Leah, Leah's maid, Rachel's maid, and finally the love of Joseph's life, Rachel. Joseph ... born of Rachel ... was the youngest ... and was born when Jacob was old. So, Jacob loved Joseph more than his other sons.

But, Joseph had dreams ... the kind of dreams that happen while one sleeps ... dreams about the future of the family ... but in very convoluted expressions. And Joseph also interpreted the dreams of others. Joseph's brothers were jealous of him for his fancy coat and the special attention his dreams gave him, and last week we heard about the brothers selling Joseph to a caravan going to Egypt. The brothers told their father, Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

These stories of the Abrahamic lineage are about good and evil ... unity and brokenness ... love and hate. Why are all these stories in the very first book of our Bible? Some of the stories we've read from this portion of Genesis don't even contain a reference to God ... it is all about dysfunctional family dynamics. Why?

This is our last reading from the Book of Genesis that we will hear this year ... at least the last reading in our lectionary before we turn to the Book of Exodus. Yet, this story gives us some clues about the nature of all these these stories.

Between the reading last week when Joseph was sold to the caravan, and today's reading, some significant things happened. Yes, Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt. But his dreams ... and his gift of interpreting dreams ... put him in favor with the Egyptian Pharaoh, and Joseph eventually rose to a position of prominence and authority.

In the meantime, there was a famine back in Canaan where Jacob and his brothers lived. In desperation, Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to seek relief from the people in Egypt, and Joseph's brothers end up meeting with Joseph ... although they do not recognize him.

This is our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. This is the part about good triumphing over evil ... about reconciliation and redemption ... and about hope. At first hiding his identity from his brothers, Joseph finally broke down and told them who he was ... their brother ... the one that they had sold into slavery. However, instead of revenge, Joseph forgave

his brothers. Joseph saw what had happened as part of God's plan for their future. In addition, after this encounter with his brothers he brought the rest of his family down to Egypt to escape the famine in their homeland. There was reconciliation. There was redemption. And, there was hope for the future.

In our gospel reading this morning we hear the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. As Matthew describes the scene, Jesus and his disciples are far from their home territory, in the region of Tyre and Sidon. They are in Gentile country ... foreign country ... a place where they would be recognized as "other." As Jesus and his friends go about their business, a Canaanite woman approaches them and starts shouting: "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon."

At this point, I think Jesus surprises all of us who want to think of him as "perfect." His actions and words are both baffling and heartbreaking. Jesus definitely hears the woman's cry, but he doesn't answer her at all ... he ignores her.

The woman, however, is tenacious. She loves her daughter ... she needs help ... and she's not afraid to make a scene. She keeps shouting until the disciples ask Jesus to please "send her away" for being such a nuisance. Finally, Jesus looks at her and explains: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Still, the woman is undeterred. She falls to her knees and says, "Lord, help me." Still, Jesus doesn't offer help. Instead, he answers her with words that are insulting no matter how hard we try to soften them: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." In Middle Eastern culture ... then and today ... invoking the reference to "dogs" is horribly offensive.

Are there ways around the unpleasantness of this moment? Maybe Jesus is tired, and wants a break from the relentless demands of the people around him. Maybe he's simply describing the reality of his understanding of who he is ... the healing he offers is for the children of Israel first. Maybe his ethnic slur is just a test ... a deliberate provocation to prove the woman's devotion.

These are all possibilities, but I really don't think they do justice to the power of this story. What makes sense to me is that the Jesus we encounter in this moment is fully human ... a product of his time and place ... shaped as we all are by the conscious and unconscious biases, prejudices, and entitlements of his religion and culture.

Yes, Jesus has been bringing healing to the sick ... but in his home territory ... to those who looked like him. Yes, Jesus has eaten with tax collectors and sinners ... those deemed ritually unclean ... but in his home territory ... to those who looked like him. Yes, Jesus has taught an unconventional wisdom ... but to people who share the same upbringing ... who worship the same God ... who share the same scriptures.

Now he is faced with a woman ... a woman ... who shares none of his background, culture, or religion. All she has is a daughter who is ill. So what? Why should he be bothered?

So the Canaanite woman gives Jesus a lesson. Turning his slur right back at the man who insulted her, she replied, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master’s table.”

It is a witty ... brilliant ... and cutting ...response. It goes directly to the very heart of Jesus’s boundary-breaking, taboo-busting, division-destroying custom of table fellowship. After all, he is the one who eats with tax collectors and prostitutes. He is the rabbi ... teacher ... who breaks bread with sinners. And Jesus’ disciples are the ones who earn the Pharisees’ contempt for eating with unwashed hands.

It is the tendency for most people to think of the Canaanite woman as the “outsider” ... the “outcast” ... the “other” ... the “them of an “us and them.” But remember, Jesus and his disciples are the ones visiting Tyre and Sidon. The Canaanite woman is in her home territory, and Jesus is the “other” ... the “outsider.” Yes, she is a Gentile ... non-Jewish ... but so is everyone around her.

This woman is saying, “Where’s my place at the table you talk about? If you are saying that ALL are included, why not me? Does your compassion end when you cross the border? You keep saying ‘Do unto others ...’ What is different now?”

Whenever I imagine this scene in my mind, I hear at least a full moment of stunned silence in the wake of the Canaanite woman’s words. I imagine the implications of her words ricocheting through Jesus’s mind and heart ... “If I am who I say I am, how can I be content while anyone is hurting? How can I not offer healing? How can I not include her and her daughter in my circle of compassion?”

Jesus accepts the instruction of the woman who challenges him. He allows her ... the ethnic, religious, and gendered “other” ... to school him in his own life and teaching. From his encounter with her he begins to deconstruct his prejudice and entitlement ... to break the barrier of his intolerance, and widen the circle of his compassion. The Jesus who never loses a verbal contest with anyone else in Scripture sits back in amazement and concedes the argument to an audacious woman. “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter is healed instantly.

This is a story of profound change in Jesus. He allows a perspective foreign to his own thinking to move him from an attitude of narrow-mindedness to an attitude of inclusion. He allows himself to be humbled, rearranged, and remade. Jesus faces his own blind spots, his own rudeness, his own prejudice, and allows himself to be opened to the full, glorious, and uncomfortable implications of just how unconditional God’s love is.

Barbara Brown Taylor describes the moment this way: “You can almost hear the huge wheel of history turning as Jesus comes to a new understanding of who he is and what he has been

called to do.” The Canaanite woman’s faith and persistence teach Jesus that God’s purpose for him “is bigger than he had imagined, that there is enough of him to go around.”

These stories confront me with a challenge. In a time of Black Lives Matter, extraordinary unemployment, income inequality, and people of color dying of COVID-19 at much higher rates than whites, how do I take seriously what Jesus took seriously. How do I look at my own hidden prejudices and entitlements so that I am empowered to fully participate in healing a broken world so that ALL are included at the table ... the table where respect ... and opportunity ... and justice is served? How is this a story ... in our time ... a story of reconciliation and redemption and hope?

Jesus humbled himself long enough to learn what only a vulnerable outsider could teach him. What would it be like to stop limiting who I will be for other people, and who I will let them be for me? What would it be like to insist on a place at the table for people who don't look, speak, behave, or worship like I do? And, what do we have to learn about ourselves to be open to a new vision for a beloved community ... a vision of a beloved community for St. Cyprian’s?

Remember, Joseph ... who was sold into slavery by his brothers ... was the vehicle for reconciliation and redemption and hope. Jesus, in listening with ears that could hear the cry of someone in need, broke through his own prejudice to see a fellow human being, and in doing so he widened the gates and threw open the door to welcome the voice of a despised foreigner. He has modeled a kind of listening and learning that should bring us to our knees. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously we, too, will engage in the hard work of uncovering our own hidden prejudices and biases. Jesus has shown us that showing compassion to others begins with our own self-knowledge ... that we have to know to what we are blind before we can really see ... we have to know to what we are deaf before we can really hear.

Jesus has shown us that compassion can be cultivated ... we can grow into greater and more inclusive love. He has left us with a bottom line we ignore at our own peril ... if our compassion is not for everyone, then it’s not compassion. If our love isn’t for everyone ... unconditionally ... then it is not unconditional love. If we want to be a force for reconciliation and redemption and hope the work begins with us. Systemic racism and the effects of white privilege and entitlement are not going to go away without each of us acknowledging our own cultural biases and prejudice. It may be hard, uncomfortable work, but if Jesus can do it then it something for us to take seriously.

The Abrahamic stories about reconciliation and redemption and hope ... and the story about the Canaanite woman ... tell us about the hard work we must do to make that a reality. So, let’s get to work!

Amen.