



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON JENNIFER KING DAUGHERTY, CANON FOR CONGREGATIONAL LIFE
THE ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 15, AUGUST 16, 2020
GENESIS 45:1-15; PSALM 133; MATTHEW 15:21-28

WIDE MERCY

Matthew 15:21-28 [*Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles." Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that 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. These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."*]

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.]

"There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." The hymn we sang a few minutes ago is one of my absolute favorites. The generous images and the sense of yearning in the tune

moves me every time we sing it – I feel it physically here in my chest. Last year, when we all planned our funerals during Lent, this was the first song I wrote down.

“There’s a kindness in God’s justice which is more than liberty.” Mercy and justice go together – they are two sides of a coin, God’s currency. There’s a shorthand distinction I learned in Sunday School a long time ago about that. Justice is getting what we deserve, and mercy is not getting what we deserve. Huh. I can see how this makes sense in the context of a human judicial system, but when I imagine God’s justice and mercy, that word “deserve” has always stopped me short – it’s transactional, about reward or punishment. Is that really God’s mercy?

Our scripture readings today grapple with mercy – both human and divine. The story of Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers concludes our eleven-week journey through the foundational stories of Genesis. We’ve followed the matriarchs and patriarchs as they listened to God’s call (and sometimes ignored it), as they married, had children (and struggled with infertility), and fought with, deceived, mourned, and cared for each other.

Last week we heard of Jacob’s favoritism of his son Joseph and how Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery out of jealousy and spite. Later, Joseph is imprisoned in Egypt and only released when Pharaoh hears of his ability to

interpret dreams. Joseph becomes Pharaoh’s trusted overseer, rising to great power and wealth.

And then a devastating famine comes to Egypt and all the surrounding countries, but thanks to Joseph, Egypt is well-prepared. Joseph’s family in Canaan is not, however, and after two years of hunger his brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain from the chief overseer, not recognizing the brother they had left for dead. Joseph recognizes them, though, and fighting back tears, he treats them like strangers and tests them to see who’ve they’ve become. Are they still the cruel, selfish men he remembers?

It turns out they have changed. They are humble, truthful, and devoted to their family. They are weighed down with remorse for harming Joseph and causing their father grief. When Joseph sees all of this, something shifts for him and whatever he might have planned to do before, he abandons revenge and makes peace with his brothers. We hear today how his pain pours out in loud weeping as he promises to shield his family from the impact of the famine’s remaining five years.

I marvel at Joseph's ability to choose mercy, but I don't think he gets there all on his own. I wonder if it has something to do with the way God's mercy flows through his entire life story, transforming him from an arrogant, competitive boy into a compassionate and forgiving man. His mind and heart are changed.

When Joseph acknowledges this to his brothers, saying essentially, "It wasn't your actions, but God who made me who I am," he's moved beyond categories of deserving and undeserving. He shows mercy to them in response to the mercy he has experienced.

The second reading is also about mercy, but it's a trickier one. Because while we're used to seeing people in the Bible exhibit prejudice or dismissiveness, we get a little uncomfortable when it's Jesus. He encounters a Gentile woman from an occupied territory – the lowest of the low in Israel-centric culture – who begs him to cure her daughter. Jesus' disciples want her sent away and he agrees with them that his mission doesn't include her.

But she pleads, "Lord, help me."

She is undeterred by Jesus' metaphor of children vs. dogs (knowing full well that

she and her daughter are clearly the dogs). She reminds him that dogs have a place at their master's table, too. Jesus praises her faith, which shows up as courage and persistence, and heals her daughter, despite the woman's undeserving status. I wonder how the disciples felt about that.

Scholars and preachers have labored for centuries to interpret this story without casting Jesus in an unflattering light. Some say Jesus intended to heal the child all along, but first wanted to offer a living parable of prejudice converted to generosity. Others say that the word "dogs" is better translated as "puppies," so Jesus is being more affectionate than dismissive.

I'm OK with seeing the fully human Jesus, though, because for me the crucial moment is when he changes his mind. Jesus changes his mind! Something shifts for him and he no longer sees the Canaanite woman through the lens of ethnic, political, and religious labels. She is family and her daughter must be healed.

I think it's significant that in Matthew's gospel, immediately after this encounter, Jesus goes back to the Galilee and up a mountain where he receives great crowds of people who bring the lame, the

maimed, the blind, the mute, and many others in need. Jesus heals them all – and they respond by praising God.

There truly is a wideness in God’s mercy, and it has nothing to do with who we are or how deserving we are.

So, what does this mean for us in Seattle in Phase 2 of a pandemic, at a time of reckoning with our history of racism, and in an increasingly divided and combative civic environment? We may not have five years of famine ahead of us, but five months of social distancing with no end yet in sight is its own deprivation.

Well, we might first remember these foundational stories. Joseph recognizes God’s presence in his life and lets it transform him. Jesus listens deeply to a woman considered an outsider and sees

his mission in a new way. They change their minds and become conduits for God’s mercy, the force of love and grace that brings new life out of suffering.

And then we might remember our experiences of this wide mercy in our own lives. Where has your mind been changed and perhaps your heart, too? Those are the foundational stories we also need to hear.

Because we are always swimming in the wide sea of God’s mercy – can you feel it? It is holding us up and sustaining us in this time and place.

So we must ask: how do we need to change our minds for reconciliation and healing to happen?



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