

Sermon – Twelfth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 15A)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-36; Matthew 15:21-28
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *Though human community can range from being an indescribable blessing to a profound curse, we are called to persist in relationship with one another. In all circumstances, God is working for reconciliation, that we might be a model of God's redeeming love.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. The joys and challenges of community
 - a. Psalm 133: "Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!"
 - i. Experiences of brethren living together in unity on vacation: the Three Dune Challenge and the time at a playground in Bayfield.
 - ii. I hope you all can point to some experience of community that has been deeply encouraging and energizing. There have been times when this congregation has been known throughout the city for this kind of community.
 - b. Of course, this is not the only possible experience of community.
 - i. There are times when it can be devastatingly bad, with people arguing, competing and picking at each other.
 - ii. Gloria Dei has also experienced that kind of community, I know.
 - iii. At times, community is completely exhausting, leaving us to question why we even try. In a world that is ever more divided, we sometimes find ourselves asking whether the Psalm 133 kind of community actually sustainable? If you find yourself overwhelmed by a bad experience of community, what is the path forward?
2. Joseph and his brothers
 - a. Joseph's story is full of community at its worst – among the 12 sons of Jacob we see competition for who is greatest, jealousy, favoritism, even murder plots.
 - i. Last week's OT reading introduced us to Joseph, one of Jacob's youngest sons, and the first born to his favored wife, Rachel. In the culture of the day, when birth order mattered greatly, Joseph should have been one of the least of the brothers – but Jacob favored him above all others, giving him lavish gifts that set him apart.
 - ii. As if that doesn't make for enough resentment, Joseph then has dreams about his brothers bowing down before him. It doesn't take a lot of psychoanalysis to see where his subconscious would have gotten that idea, but at the time dreams were understood to be prophetic – so Joseph interpreted the dreams as foretelling an even greater elevation over his brothers. And, being young and spoiled and immature, he goes and brags about the dreams to the whole family.
 - iii. Taking all of this into account (together with some incidents where Joseph proves to be a tattle-tale, getting his older brothers in trouble over some minor indiscretions), it's no wonder that the brothers' resentment of Joseph grew beyond

all bounds. The brothers plotted to kill him, and only a moment of conscience spares his life. Instead, Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery to some Egyptian traders.

- b. Joseph could have given up easily at this point.
 - i. He was taken away from his home, his family, his land. Again, like we saw with Jacob's story, this is what it looks like for God's plans and promises to fall apart – and his dreams now seem out of reach.
 - ii. If you follow Joseph's story, it's a bit of a roller coaster! He works faithfully, making the best of his new lot in life, and is rewarded! But then a false accusation lands him in an Egyptian prison.
 - iii. Still, Joseph holds on to hope that God is with him, and he is ultimately delivered from prison. Moreover, through a miraculous set of events, he is raised to the righthand of Pharaoh, and put in charge of administering the whole kingdom of Egypt.
- c. Reconciliation with his brothers
 - i. And that is where we find Joseph in today's reading. His brothers have come to Egypt to ask for help amid a famine, and they are now in Joseph's power. His dreams have at last come true!
 - ii. Using his power, Joseph tests his brothers, looking to see whether they have changed; when they refuse to sacrifice one of their own (Joseph's younger full brother, Benjamin), he sees that they have learned to care for each other – and to put the needs of their family over their own needs and desires.
 - iii. At last, Joseph is able to forgive his brothers, and he is reconciled to them. And what a beautiful scene it is. All of the brokenness ultimately gives way to a more beautiful end than would have been possible otherwise.
- d. But how do we get to that point?
 - i. Joseph went through some incredible hardships, but by the time that he is reunited with his brothers, the story has turned out great for him. He is now in a position of incredible power, and is able to manipulate the situation with his brothers until he is assured that they have changed and are repentant.
 - ii. But most of us don't get to have that kind of power or assurance. So, is it possible for us to find community in the midst of a broken world, among messy and imperfect people? And what does it look like to repair community when it is broken?
 - iii. I think our texts today offer us some guidance for living in community, even when it is challenging.

3. Our call to community – even when messy

- a. First, our Gospel passage today points to our need for persistence.
 - i. Now, don't get me wrong – this is a challenging and disturbing passage! A desperate mother comes to Jesus for help, and he initially turns her away because she is not Jewish – going so far as to compare her and her people to dogs.
 - ii. Scholars and faithful Christians have long wrestled with this passage, especially because it seems so out of character for Jesus. While there are lots of different interpretations, I am particularly drawn to the idea that Jesus is theatrically using the language of racism and nationalism that was all too common in his context, so that he might expose it as false and empty.

- iii. In this reading, the woman's persistence shows that her faith is greater than that of the disciples who are steeped in racial & national prejudice – and who are therefore ready to condemn the woman. The woman trusts that the promises and grace of God are meant for her and her daughter, and so she doggedly(!) persists in seeking healing.
 - iv. In response to her persistence, Jesus lifts her up as a model of faith – and I think we need this model if we are to live in community! The truth is that every community will know times of pain and division. We all wrestle at some level with prejudice, with insecurity, with pride; these inevitable lead to offense and broken relationships. But we are called to persist in seeking the blessings of community, to hang on – even in the times of pain and brokenness – to the vision in today's Psalm.
- b. Second, the story of Joseph calls us to look for God's redemptive work, especially in the places of brokenness.
 - i. Notice how Joseph talks about what his brothers did to him. He doesn't minimize or ignore what they did: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." But he doesn't stop there; rather, he recognizes that God was at work even in the darkest moments: "God sent me before you to preserve life."
 - ii. If you keep reading, you see that Joseph later puts it even more directly: what his brothers meant for evil against him, God used for good (Genesis 50:20). This is the good news – that God delights redemption, in bringing good out of even the most broken circumstances. The reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers is so beautiful precisely because it redeems of all the evil that preceded it.
 - iii. We are called, therefore, to look for God's redeeming work in the places of brokenness and pain in our communities. This doesn't mean ignoring or minimizing the problems and offenses, but rather we are invited to see the problems as opportunities for God to show up.
 - iv. When we persist in community and look for God to show up, miracles can happen. It is here that we can embrace humility, taking responsibility for our own faults. It is here that we can see the people who have hurt us in a new light, having compassion for the burdens that they are carrying. It is here that we can find courage to speak the truth about how we have been hurt, in hope that healing is possible. It is here that we can dare to forgive, and to be forgiven.
- c. Finally, our reading from Romans reminds us that the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable.
 - i. God has given us the gift of community, and has called us to faithfully (and persistently!) love each other. But, thankfully, this gift and calling does not depend only on our imperfect efforts.
 - ii. Rather, the community to which we aspire is rooted in the very nature and character of the triune God who is love. We worship the God who created this wonderful world and each of us out of an abundance of love, and this God will not give up on creation.
 - iii. Rather, God will continue working in the broken places until all is set right. "To God be the glory forever."

Amen.

Note: Today's Gospel story depicts a disturbing encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite **woman**. This is a challenging passage, and the choice to focus on Joseph's story in 2026 does not leave sufficient time to engage fully with the Gospel passage. For those who are interested, below is a sermon from 2023 which delved more deeply into the Gospel. Further conversation is also always welcome!

Sermon
August 20, 2023

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Sermon – Proper 15, Year A, Track 2

Scripture Texts: Isaiah 56:1,6-8; Psalm 67; Romans 11:1-2a,29-32; Matthew 15:10-28
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We are blessed to be a blessing. God's call on our lives always takes us beyond our own social, economic, religious, racial, and ethnic groups, for God's house "shall be called a house of prayer for all nations."*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

I don't know if you've noticed, but there has been a common theme in the collects for the past several weeks. All throughout July and August, these prayers have dealt with our dependence on God, on our inability to know and do good when left to our own devices, on our need for grace. Today, that theme takes on a new focus, looking specifically at Jesus as our "example of Godly life." In his unique role as God made flesh, Jesus not only shows us what God is like, he also models a new way to be human. In Jesus, we both see the depths of God's faithful love, and we are empowered to live according to that love. In the words of this week's collect, we need to both "receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life."

So what, then, are we supposed to do with today's Gospel reading? Jesus is supposed to be our savior and guide, and yet today's reading shows him acting callously rude, at best, and perhaps

even racist. A woman – a mother – comes to Jesus, begging for him to have mercy and heal her daughter, who is “tormented by a demon.” While the text does not give us more details, other biblical accounts of demon possession show us people who are out of their mind, unable to control their behavior. In fact, in another story we hear from a father of a demon possessed boy that the demon keeps trying to throw his child into fire. So, even if you find the idea of demon possession to be strange or unbelievable, know that something is not right with this child, and that her mother is desperate to find some way of helping her. I’m sure the mother sought advice from other parents, but none of the parenting strategies seem to work. She probably spent a fortune visiting different doctors, but none of the treatments have been effective. And, of course, she would have sought out every religious leader she could find, but their prayers and sacrifices have been in vain. I can only imagine how exhausted this mother must be when she finally hears that there is a teacher visiting her region who has a reputation for healing the sick and casting out demons.

So, this Canaanite mother seeks out a Jewish Rabbi to ask for help. Don’t miss the significance of these ethnic identities; Canaanites and Jews have a long history of warfare, oppression, and even genocide. But no mother will let history stand in the way help for her child. She come to Jesus and calls him “Lord” and “son of David.” Not only does she grant him authority over her, she also invokes the name of David, the great Jewish hero who conquered the Canaanite stronghold of Jerusalem. Perhaps, if she shows Jesus enough honor and respect, he will deign to help her daughter. But the text tells us, “he did not answer her at all.” The silence is deafening. Still, she does not give up; she keeps calling out for mercy – to the point that Jesus’ disciples are fed up. “And Jesus’ 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.’”

You know, I'm sure, how much worse the disappointment and desperation feels when you've let yourself get your hopes up, only to have them dashed. The Canaanite mother has let herself hope that Jesus will be different than other Jews, that he will have mercy. But he makes it clear that his mission and his gifts of healing are reserved only for his people. And then, he adds insult to injury: "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Calling Canaanites dogs was, effectively, a dehumanizing racial slur. It is definitely not the kind of thing that you'd expect to hear from Jesus, and it must have been devastating for the mother to hear it from his lips. If you're uncomfortable...good. You should be. What is going on here?

Well, some scholars see this passage as an example of Jesus' humanity. Prejudice is an inescapable part of the human condition and, like it or not, we all have blind spots. Jesus would have inherited this prejudice against Canaanites in the same way that we all inherit some degree of prejudice against people who come from a different social class or economic standing or religion or race or ethnicity. So, maybe the great faith of this Canaanite mother opens Jesus' eyes, pushing him to recognize that his calling goes beyond the people of Israel. Who among us, facing fear and disappointment and apparent prejudice would be able to respond as she did, with such grace and wit and hope: "Yes, Lord, but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." This is a model of faith that we can all learn from.

But, while I love that this interpretation honors the faith of the Canaanite mother, I think that a close reading of its contexts suggests that there is more going on here. Context matters, and Matthew places Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite mother just after a discussion about cleanliness. Ritual cleanliness was a crucial part of the Old Testament law. Jewish culture was defined, in part, by laws about what foods to eat and what to avoid, about when and how to wash, and about the sacrifices offered to God in worship. Some of these laws might seem strange or primitive to those of

us outside of the Jewish context, but they have helped to sustain the faith and identity of Jewish people for thousands of years. At their best, these laws are a reminder of God's presence in every aspect of life and of God's desire for every part of creation to be made whole and holy. But, again, prejudice is an inescapable part of the human condition, and all too often religious traditions are used to justify and condone prejudice, to judge and to exclude. Throughout the Old Testament, there is a streak of Jewish nationalism that views the law as proof that God favors the Jews over their neighbors, regarding foreigners as unclean dogs.

But Jesus knows better. Looking back to the very beginning of the Jewish people, God told Abraham that he and his descendants were blessed *in order that they might be a blessing to all people*. As we see in today's passage from the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, God has always planned to gather foreigners into the people of God, to make the house of God "a house of prayer for all peoples." Jesus knew his history; he knew the book of Isaiah, and he quoted from it regularly. So it is no surprise that he challenges those who would use the law to judge and to exclude. As we see in the beginning of today's Gospel, "it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles...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..."

With this context in mind, I think we are now able to understand the full depth of Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite mother. Jesus has seen how much his disciples struggle with the idea of cleanliness; he knows how easily and how often his disciples are swayed by nationalism, how willing they are to use God's laws to judge and to exclude. So, I think he intentionally stays silent when the Canaanite mother first calls out, because – sure enough – his disciples are ready to judge and to exclude her. So, Jesus plays along; he parrots the justifications used to judge and to exclude.

He theatrically uses the language of prejudice and hate in order to expose it as empty and unfaithful. And, he invites the Canaanite mother to help him teach his disciples what real faithfulness looks like. In this unclean foreigner, we see that real faithfulness does not judge or exclude. Real faithfulness remembers that we are all dependent on God's mercy. Real faithfulness hopes and it trusts that God will meet us in our moments of need.

So, who will you be in this story? Will you be like the disciples, embracing the prejudices you've inherited, using religion to judge and to exclude? Or will you be like the Canaanite mother, faithfully hoping and trusting in Jesus and the healing that he offers? The good news of this story is that God does not leave us in our prejudices. Through Jesus, we receive grace and healing and more blessings that we can ever imagine. And God's blessings are never just for those who first receive them; we are blessed so that we can be a blessing to a world in need of hope.

As we close, please pray with me, again, our collect of the day: "Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever." ***Amen.***