

Bible Study
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 15, Year A
August 20, 2017

[RCL] Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

Genesis 45:1-15

Oftentimes, when we read the stories of Genesis (and other biblical books), we are perplexed at the turn of events attributed to God. For example, why would God place a forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden? Why would God destroy the world through a devastating flood? Why would God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son? In today's Genesis text, we might ask, "Why did God put Joseph and his family through such an ordeal, just to get Joseph into Egypt (as it says in verse 8)?" These stories might not be seen as literal presentations of God's actions and motives.

Rather, they may be understood as myths, in the sense of stories that use symbolism to speak about reality, or, in the case of the Patriarch stories, legends, that is, interpretive stories of historic events. We should ask ourselves then what theological points the author was trying to make through this story. The answer might be that God can act in our lives and provide for us, even through circumstances that are apparently without hope, such as severe family strife or times of deprivation.

Notice also how Joseph's tearful reunion with his brothers (and his observation that this has all been God's work) comes after a few chapters of devious dealing on Joseph's part. Of course, his brothers previously had sold him into slavery. And they are all the sons of Jacob, the one who took advantage of his own brother and deceived his elderly father. These are not people with whom we would want to share a long car ride! Despite their flaws and bad behavior, however, God still chooses them and manages to do great things through them. Proof indeed that God can write straight with crooked lines!

- Where might God be acting unexpectedly in our church, families, and other experiences, especially in those circumstances where we feel there is no hope?
- How does God's choice of Joseph, his brothers and father, despite their unsavoriness and failings, speak to your own experience of God's grace in those circumstances and people who might not have been our first choice?

Psalm 133

Commentators suggest that this psalm could be extolling either the joys of harmony in the family, or the fittingness of worshippers participating in the sacred liturgy in the Temple on Mt. Zion. Regardless, this psalm, despite its joyful tone, can serve as a sharp warning and even rebuke to our modern Christianity, so often fraught with divisiveness. We are reminded here that our fellow worshippers are indeed our "brethren". Sometimes it can be difficult to be mindful of this reality, especially when we differ on matters of liturgical practice, discipline, ideology, or

theology. Notice how the sacred author frames this Psalm with a beginning mention of harmony among people and a concluding statement that the blessing of the Lord is life.

Undoubtedly, the two are linked – the fullness of life can only be experienced when there is harmony within the family of faith.

- How might each of us reform our own actions, thoughts, and words so that we can be “brethren living in unity”?
- The biblical notion of salvation is often characterized as a communal experience of the fullness of life. How does this psalm serve as a challenge to some popular ideas that equate “being saved” with getting into heaven?
- What emotions, ideals, or hopes are evoked in the psalmist’s use of “precious oil ... running,” and “the dew of Hermon”? What is being said about the effects of unity?

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Paul continues to ponder the conundrum of Israel’s failure to accept the gospel of Jesus. His references to Abraham and the tribe of Benjamin might serve to evoke Paul’s namesake, Saul the king, of this same tribe, who also struggled with the unbelief of his people. Prior to Saul’s becoming king, God told the prophet Samuel, “They have rejected me as their king” (1 Sam 8:7). The people are greatly afraid of God’s anger, but Samuel assures them that God will not cast them off, just as Paul says that the Lord will not reject his people now. Paul thus situates Israel’s rejection of Jesus in a larger narrative of his peoples’ struggle to believe.

Paul’s reflections on God’s mercy illustrate how redemption can be brought out of what appears to be a great failure. Just as non-Israelites had previously rejected God, they now have experienced redemption through the sheer mercy of God, not because they did anything to deserve it. So too will Israel’s failure to accept Jesus serve as an occasion for God’s mercy. Above all, Paul tries to illustrate that human disobedience and failure cannot frustrate God’s grace. Grace is a free and abundant gift; nothing can stand in its way.

- How does your personal narrative of faith mirror that of Israel, i.e. the waxing and waning of belief and unbelief?
- Where in our experience of faith and life has God brought about redemption and grace despite our actions that appear to obstruct God’s gifts?

Matthew 15: (10-20), 21-28

This short pericope provides a raw, telling glimpse of the human Jesus, for this is the only instance in the Gospels when he loses an argument! Whenever he is confronted publically, Jesus always has a response to his questioners. But in this instance, his female Canaanite interlocutor manages to stump him. More significantly, it appears that Jesus evolves in his thinking about the

nature and scope of his ministry. He initially makes it clear to the woman that he has come for the sake of Israel, but by the conclusion of this episode something has changed.

- This story serves as a challenge to the closed religious mind – those who see faith as static and not subject to development. Jesus exhibits a willingness and ability to change and take on a new perspective. Are there any areas of your faith life where you might be closed-minded or short-sighted?
- How have you been challenged with a new perspective and way of articulating some aspect of your faith that made you feel uncomfortable, but resonated with you nonetheless?
- How does our encounter with and contemplation of the humanness of Jesus nourish our spirituality, identity as disciples, and faith life?

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