

PENTECOST 12

Proper 15 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Christine Havens of the Seminary of the Southwest in 2014.

Genesis 45:1-15

45 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.' ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

Commentary from Christine Havens

A friend, who is a senior Master of Divinity student, and I had a conversation about veterans today. He and a mutual friend, who is an Episcopal priest in the Austin area, work together on the Episcopal Veterans Fellowship here, planning services and pilgrimages; creating safe space for those who served in America's wars and military actions. At one point in the conversation, my friend stated that many of the veterans have difficulty with reconciliation. He meant the rite – the ministry – of reconciliation found in the Book of Common Prayer. In so many ways, these men and women already feel excluded, set apart, from mainstream culture – the military subculture that they learn in training separates them at the beginning of service, and the treatment they receive after their service are examples. How much more might they feel excluded in having enacted violence against others in the name of their country?

Reconciling this violence within themselves and with God, with the intention of welcoming them back into church, into society, into humanity, into feeling God's love, may prove painful and difficult; may exacerbate feelings of exclusion.

Discussion Questions

How might today's lesson of Joseph's reconciliation with his brothers be used to help a veteran overcome these feelings?

Psalm 133

- ¹ Oh, how good and pleasant it is, *
when brethren live together in unity!
- ² It is like fine oil upon the head *
that runs down upon the beard,
- ³ Upon the beard of Aaron, *
and runs down upon the collar of his robe.
- ⁴ It is like the dew of Hermon *
that falls upon the hills of Zion.
- ⁵ For there the Lord has ordained the blessing: *
life for evermore.

Commentary from Christine Havens

*“When April with his showers sweet with fruit
The drought of March has pierced unto the root
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power
To generate therein and sire the flower;
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,
Quickened again, in every holt and heath,
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun
Into the Ram one half his course has run,
And many little birds make melody
That sleep through all the night with open eye
(So Nature pricks them on to ramp and rage) –
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage.”*

Those are the first 12 lines from Geoffrey Chaucer’s “Canterbury Tales,” written in 1475 in England. In this long poem, an assortment of pilgrims travel to the cathedral at Canterbury, where Thomas Beckett was murdered by Henry II – a very popular pilgrimage. Some people also undertook pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Although the above verses have been translated into modern English, Chaucer wrote in Middle English, which, for us, now, is strange and exotic to the ears when heard and difficult to read. And even after translation, some of the images, metaphors and similes are no longer familiar to us either.

Today’s psalm is one of the Songs of Ascent (in Hebrew, Shir Hama’aloth), which scholars believe pilgrims recited or sang on their way to Jerusalem. Read it aloud once or twice; if in a group, have two different people read it. Maybe even attempt to sing it. Does it also contain, like “The Canterbury Tales,” images that may not be familiar to us?

Discussion Questions

What is important about the dew of Hermon falling upon the hills of Zion? For what might it be a metaphor? What about oil upon the beard of Aaron?

What are the similarities between Psalm 133 and “The Canterbury Tales”? What do you notice about them? What feelings do they evoke? Why?

Does America have any poems or cultural icons relating to pilgrims? How do we relate to pilgrimages in our Christian lives? How do we relate pilgrimages to Christ?

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

11 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ² God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?

²⁹ For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰ Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹ so also they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy. ³² For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Commentary from Christine Havens

“For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.” What does Paul mean here? The lectionary omits a large portion of verses in this lesson. How does reading them change your understanding of Paul’s statement, if at all?

Some scholars view Paul’s letter to the Romans, a church he did not found, as an attempt to gain support for a trip he wished to undertake to Spain – a mission trip. Re-read all of today’s lessons. How might they speak to us of the differences between mission and pilgrimage?

Discussion Questions

What are the differences between a mission trip and a pilgrimage?

How is your life as a Christian informed by mission and pilgrimage?

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰Then he called the crowd to him and said to them, “Listen and understand: ¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.” ¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?” ¹³He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. ¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind. And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.” ¹⁵But Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” ¹⁶Then he said, “Are you also still without understanding? ¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach and goes out into the sewer? ¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. ¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. ²⁰These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.”

²¹Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. ²²Just 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.” ²³But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, “Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.” ²⁴He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” ²⁶He answered, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” ²⁷She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, “Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.” And her daughter was healed from that moment.

Commentary from Christine Havens

In today’s gospel lesson, Matthew relates two powerful episodes in Jesus’ life. The lectionary treats the first story (verses 10-20) as optional. How do these verses, along with the beginning of the chapter, change your perception of the conversation? How is Jesus choosing to relate to the Pharisees and scribes?

Hand sanitizer has become a ubiquitous part of 21st century American culture. Bottles or wipes are available for consumption just about everywhere; a person can choose to use it before grabbing a shopping cart or prior to taking communion. Cruise ships apparently have crew members standing ready to squirt it on the hands of those in line for buffet; the website on which I read this did not mention whether this was optional for passengers. How many, if any, askance glances might one receive for refusing hand sanitizer? Would you judge someone for not using hand sanitizer before partaking in a communal meal?

The Pharisees take offense at the actions of Jesus and the disciples because they “[broke] the tradition of the elders” (verse 2). This tradition reflects Jewish concerns with ritual impurity and preserving the Law (Torah). The Pharisees did not worry about bacteria and germs in their insistence on washing hands prior to a meal; rather, that is our cultural concern.

Discussion Questions

Might the use of hand sanitizer be a ritual for some people? How might tradition be related to purity for us as Christians? How might tradition be related to purity in 21st century America or Western culture?

How might purity be related to exclusion? What about tradition? Is “that’s the way we’ve always done it” a stumbling block for your church in terms of hospitality and inclusion?

How might concerns about tradition and purity be related to the story of the Canaanite woman?