

Proper 15, Year A, August 16-20, 2017  
Genesis 45:1-15  
Psalm 133  
Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32  
Matthew 15:10-28

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts always be acceptable your sight, O God, our rock and our redeemer.*

I suspect most of you are wondering just how the seminary intern wound up preaching on these readings. Well, when Fr. Marvin said that we should find another weekend for me to preach, I looked at my calendar, and thought, “The weekend of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> looks good.”

I didn’t look at the readings.

I won’t make that mistake again.

The various parts of today’s readings seem disjointed to me. It seems like today’s readings are made up of only a part of the story, or have connecting sections missing. In the reading from Genesis, we have only the end of the story of Joseph and his brothers, the other bookend from last week’s reading of his brothers selling Joseph into slavery. And there’s plenty of story missing in between those two.

In the reading from Romans, we have the beginning and end of a passage about the relative roles of Jews and Gentiles in salvation. Again, the middle is missing.

And today’s Gospel has two seemingly unrelated parts.

But through these readings runs the theme of reconciliation: reconciliation with those who have hurt us, reconciliation with those who oppose us, and reconciliation with those who are marginalized and invisible to us. And in these readings we can see the grace that comes from reconciliation and inclusion. In the wake of the civil unrest and disrespect of others in this country, and particularly of the events of last weekend, timely readings indeed.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is a familiar one – it’s even been made into a musical. But we think of it as the story of *Joseph*, with his brothers as incidental characters. We usually don’t look at it from the perspective of the brothers. They had to face the younger brother they had sold into slavery. And he essentially had the power of life or death over them. Wow. Facing someone you’ve wronged who can deny you access to life’s basic needs? Someone who really does have the power in the situation? Joseph easily could have decided to

get revenge, and the story would have ended very differently. Instead, Joseph chose the path of forgiveness and reconciliation.

Today's Gospel follows immediately after last week's reading about Jesus walking on water, which takes place shortly after Herod has put to death John the Baptist. And we pick up the reading in *the middle* of the action. The beginning of the reading we've just heard is the continuation of an argument – one we don't hear – over complaints by the Pharisees that the disciples don't wash their hands before they eat – “you don't follow our customs.”

Ironically, however, washing hands before eating isn't even one of the 613 laws defining ritual purity in Leviticus. It's something specific to the Pharisees' tradition. It wasn't something the disciples would have even been expected to follow. It was just a way to say, “you're different from us. You're not one of us.” Now, we know today that washing hands before eating is good idea – there are physical risks to eating with dirty hands. But I digress.

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells first the crowds and then the disciples that failure to live in accordance with standards of physical cleanliness is not the problem. What defiles is failure to live in accordance with God's laws. The list he provides of what defiles is straight from the commandments: “evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. (I'm reminded of a phrase from the Great Litany: “from all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy, from envy, hatred, and malice; and from all want of charity, good Lord deliver us.”) What defiles are the intentions and actions that hurt others.

And we see these kinds of actions every day in our world. We see them in our political rhetoric, in the frequent acts of terrorism that pervade our news, in the violence and conflict we saw in Charlottesville last weekend.

When we hate, when we exclude, when we are willing to hurt others to get what we want, and when we tolerate those attitudes and actions, we defile ourselves. We separate ourselves from each other, and from God.

And we violate our Baptismal Covenant.

But that's only the first half of the Gospel reading.

The second half is one of the harder scriptures in the New Testament: Jesus ignores a Canaanite woman who asks for his help, claiming that she's outside the scope of his

responsibility – only the lost sheep of Israel – and likens her to a dog, which was probably a racial slur.

The story of the Canaanite woman would have been far more scandalous to the first-century readers of Matthew’s Gospel than it is to us, and for very different reasons. The Canaanite woman was beneath the notice of Jesus and the disciples on multiple counts. She was not Jewish. She was female, and she had a child, but no male protector in sight. She was clearly “other” and very probably “unnoticeable.” That Jesus ignored her was no surprise. It was also no surprise that the disciples wanted him to send her away. *Her* behavior would have been considered scandalous. She shouted. She approached a male who was not part of her family. But she recognized Jesus as the Son of David, and she cared enough about someone other than herself to shout to attract his attention.

The surprise in the story begins when Jesus answers her at all, even to reject her request and exclude her from his ministry – “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Under the behavior code of the time, he would have never even responded. The shocking part is when he uses the analogy of the Jews as children and the Canaanites as domesticated dogs – doubly shocking because the Jews of that time did not keep dogs as pets. Her ability to turn that analogy around, to point out that the dogs can eat at the same time as the children, is a game-changer. Her persistence opens Jesus’ eyes to someone who is different, who doesn’t fit nicely in his world, so that he can see her as a person. Even Jesus had to have his perception widened. And with that widening came an expansion of his mission. His understanding of the ones he was called to find and heal was broadened immeasurably.

The easy way to hear the story is as one of the many miracles of healing. But this is so much more. This is a story of a paradigm shift, and of inclusion and reconciliation. This story calls us to include and heal those who are most marginalized, to work for reconciliation with those who are different from us.

In our Baptismal covenant, which we renew at every Baptism, as well as several times each year, we make five promises by answering five questions with the response, “I will, with God’s help.” Anyone know what the fourth and fifth promises are? (You can find them on page 305 of the Book of Common Prayer.) “Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?” *In all persons*. That means everyone – no one left out. Not just family and friends, not just people like us. Everyone.

“Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?” Justice. Peace. Respect the dignity of every human being.

When we engage in racism, sexism, or any other “ism” you can think of, we break these promises. When we benefit from a way of life that tolerates discrimination, when we ignore the sins of our society – the ones we don’t notice, we are accepting the “evil done on our behalf” as if it doesn’t matter.

As Christians, we’re called to live a life of reconciliation, to work for reconciliation among all people, to work to reconcile the world to God. And that begins with choosing love over hate. I recently saw a t-shirt that said, “Anyone can hate; it costs to love.” Love requires action, unselfishness, acts of kindness and caring. Yet I think that this quotation misses something important: the costs of hate – isolation, anger, loss of relationship. “From all blindness of heart; from pride, vainglory, and hypocrisy, from envy, hatred, and malice; and from all want of charity, good Lord deliver us.”

In His recognition of the Canaanite woman’s faith and in healing her daughter, Jesus modeled for us God’s unconditional acceptance and reconciling love. That God’s reconciling love is available to all is part of the passage from Roman’s as well. While God has not rejected the Israelites, he also shows mercy to Gentiles (i.e., the Romans). The psalm tells of the joys of living in love and charity with each other. And we see God’s hand at work in turning evil to good in the story of Joseph, and Joseph’s recognition of God at work. We also see the grace and love that comes from reconciliation in his reunion with his brothers.

As Christians, living out our Baptismal Covenant, we’ve promised to seek and serve Christ in all persons, to work for reconciliation, to respect the dignity of every human being. So where are we ignoring or demeaning those we see as “other”? Sometimes, we don’t even notice those who are different from us. How do we even learn to see them? How would willingness to open our lives and hearts to them be an act of reconciliation? And how would that fill our lives with grace?

