

Genesis 45:1-15 The Brothers and the Gentile Woman
Matthew 15:21-28

This past Sunday, while I was away on vacation, I visited the Kirkwood Baptist near St. Louis, which is where my father attends. Being Baptist, I did not expect the minister to pay much attention to the lectionary readings, as has been our practice in recent times.

When, however, they read from the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Genesis, I thought they were following the lectionary because all summer the readings have been coming from Matthew and Genesis and also Romans.

Then I came home and began to plan for today's service and discovered that they had read today's readings last Sunday, and the sermon was based on the story in Genesis we have read today, it was kind of a preliminary preparation.

The first observation I made was that the incident in Charlottesville was fresh on the pastor's mind. I guess it is still fresh on everyone's mind. These are sensitive times. Anyway, what was said about Joseph and his brothers was given with that incident in mind.

I also noted that though the text in Matthew was read it was not referred to in any way, no connection was made between it and the one in Genesis.

Finally, once he got into the meat of the sermon, the focus turned to the provocative theology, that he considered dangerous, that God somehow willed Jacob's preferential treatment of his sons and Joseph's brattiness, the brother's vengefulness and deceit, and the human trafficking Joseph suffered; the incident with Potiphar's wife and the subsequent imprisonment, all of it. This theology of God's sovereignty in the face of evil was spoken of as if it only appeared in this story and did not deserve to be considered biblical.

The Gentile Woman

Bear with me as I go back and forth for awhile between the Joseph story and the Canaanite woman story. The woman in question was from Tyre, she was Syro-Phoenician. Canaanite. That means she was a Gentile. In a social analysis we would be forced to conclude that she was also "privileged," a loaded term in our context.

Jesus and his disciples were Galilean Jewish peasants from the back country, harassed, victims of socio-economic injustice, at least partly at the hands of the people of Syria to their north.

So when she comes to Jesus for help, he tells her to stuff it. "It is not right to give to the dogs what is meant for the children." There is no way to clean that up and make it polite. It is not right to give to the Gentiles what is meant for the Jews. That is what Jesus said and

what he meant. It is uncomfortable for us because it is unkind and we don't like to think of Jesus that way.

Joseph

It is important for us to put ourselves in Joseph's shoes if we can. We are told that Joseph recognized his brother's immediately when they came to ask for food during the famine, though they were unable to recognize him. It undoubtedly brought back the old feelings. He was rightly angry with them.

More than once we are told he wept bitterly. He accused them of being spies. They paid him for food and he put the money back in their bags to make it look as though they had stolen the food. He made them return home to bring their youngest brother with them, which they did.

Later something turned in Joseph. Maybe it was the sight of Benjamin, or when Judah made an impassioned and desperate plea for Benjamin on their father's behalf. Finally, he sent everyone out of the room to make himself known to his brothers. It is such a grand story.

Jesus

Something also turned in Jesus when this Canaanite woman responded to his unkind rejection of her, "even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table." Then

he saw her not as an enemy but as a human being, a mom whose child was sick, and he could relate to that because he had seen it before.

All their differences melted away in the humanity of the moment. Fifty years later when the Christians got around to writing gospels to tell their story, they recorded this incident because it was a miracle.

The miracle happened when people meet as human beings. "You have faith!" Jesus said, "your daughter is well." It is a tough story.

Dangerous Theology

And when it comes to the dangerous theology of the bible, it goes a little something like this. The theology of the bible is that the crucifixion of Jesus is God's will. It is *tough* theology, and it is *dangerous* theology, but it is also most assuredly *biblical* theology, so we have to deal with it. "We preach Christ crucified," is the way Paul put it, "a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to everyone else."

It is God's will that all of us are meant to love one another, and love requires a measure of freedom. We are meant to see one another the way Jesus saw the woman, the way Joseph saw his brothers in the end. And yet this measure of freedom has produced evil. God does not will the evil, but God does will the freedom.

For the people in the times of Jesus, the evil showed up in the struggle for Jewish or Gentile supremacy. We can see it in our own struggle against racism.

It should go without saying, of course, that there is no comparison between white supremacy and civil rights. White supremacy is evil and unjust and unconstitutional as well as counter to biblical justice. Civil rights are just and good, constitutional and in line with biblical justice.

The Brothers and the Woman

Do you see what we have in these two stories? In the one story, we find the reconciliation of brothers who have hated one another, and in the other we find the acceptance of someone who is different, on the other side of things, enemy.

The gospel news is that God redeems evil, that is the theology of the bible. Israel and his sons were given the freedom to be just or unjust, kind or unkind, honest or dishonest, jealous or compassionate. No one acted out anything other than what was at the center of their being. And yet their actions were ordered in such a way to result in their good, even when their actions were evil.

In the time of Jesus, everyone also acted with a curious freedom that led to an unjust execution of an

innocent man. And yet the crucifixion itself became the means of justice and redemption.

Upon reflection, we will find that many of the the major decisions in life are made voluntarily, sometimes good, working to our benefit, sometimes bad, seemingly working to our detriment.

But here is the miracle, that we are forced to admit another factor in the mix of things; the divine factor; leading, guiding, mending, shaping the course of our lives so that even the bad decisions have worked to our benefit. "All things work together . . ."

This miracle is the central message of the the bible. The result is that we are changed. This transformation of the heart is a large part of what it means to accept Christ, to have faith. We proclaim that transformation. We witness to that faith.

The result is that by healing her daughter, Jesus and his followers accepted the Gentile woman, much like in the end Joseph forgave his brothers, and was reconciled to them with many tears and much rejoicing.

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