

LECTIONARY REFLECTIONS

PROPER 15, YEAR A

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Genesis 45:1-15

Psalm 133

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Matthew 15(10-20), 21-28

Genesis 45:1-15

In this lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, we are presented with a difficult truth to confront. According to Joseph, God caused all of the hardships he endured. According to Joseph, his brothers did not send him into slavery in Egypt. God did. It is true that his brothers acted cruelly toward him, but Joseph understands that their cruelty served the purpose of enabling him to preserve the remnant of his family and of the whole Jewish people by becoming great in Egypt and saving lives. Joseph desires the restoration and complete reconciliation of his family, and through all that he endured, God accomplished just that. Imagine the feelings that Joseph's brothers experienced when they discover that Joseph is still alive and has become such a prominent figure in Egypt – joy that he is still alive, dismay and horror at their own cruelty, fear that Joseph might be angry and vengeful toward them, relief that he is not. After Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, we are told that they embrace each other and weep. Then the Scriptures say, "...and after that his brothers talked with him." I imagine that this is the first real talk Joseph and his brothers have ever had – one where there is no pretense, no lording it over one another, no resentment. Honest, face-to-face conversation.

Can you identify times in your life when bad things have happened and God has used those circumstances to accomplish good purposes? What about in your life now? Are there places where someone or something has perhaps intended harm, but God has meant and used it for good? Are there places in your own family where God might be working even now to reconcile and restore?

Psalm 133

The theme of all being restored and reconciled to harmony is continued in this psalm. Where I attended college for my undergraduate degree (The University of the South in Sewanee, TN), this was considered the university psalm – with the emphasis on brothers and sisters dwelling together in unity...even when they believe, think and feel different things. Even when there is conflict, God intends unity and blessing...life forever more.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

Again, this is a difficult Scripture to read. It sounds as if Paul is saying that God intends to consign a group of people to disobedience just so that he can demonstrate mercy. This is certainly not God acting as we might expect Him to. We cannot imagine a God that would deliberately make people be disobedient. But neither can we imagine the God of Joseph who allowed, maybe even blessed, his brothers' actions against him just so that he could demonstrate mercy and salvation. Through the "old"

covenant, God embraces the Hebrew people as His own. Through the “new” covenant, God includes us Christians and thus frees everyone. The one covenant does not exclude the other. From the very beginning God’s call and gifts have been irrevocable.

From the very beginning, God’s call to you has been there. From the very beginning He has blessed you with gifts that cannot be taken away. What is the nature of that call to you, and what are the gifts? Can you identify ways in your own life in which God has acted not as you expect?

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

The Gospel lesson presents two scenarios this week, although one is optional. However, the two invite some comparison. In both we see people, including Jesus, acting outside our expectations of them. In both, traditions are broken...by the disciples, by the Canaanite woman, by Jesus. The theme is that while traditions are important, they sometimes get in the way of the true emergence of the Kingdom of God. In the first scenario, Jesus is challenging purity laws. The Jewish tradition had always been to observe strictly the food that is put into one’s body with the understanding that certain foods would render a person unclean. With somewhat crude imagery, Jesus emphasizes that the food that goes into a body exits through the sewer and has only limited impact on the body. However, what comes out of a person’s heart and mouth (damaging words) can hurt and defile the world with an impact that lasts well beyond the words. Those who were listening to Jesus were not expecting this. They were expecting Jesus to support and adhere to the laws. The Scripture then abruptly shifts to the story of the Canaanite mother who wants healing for her demon-possessed daughter. She does not adhere to tradition at all! Tradition would have her, a woman, respect the social norm of the day that women were quiet in public and did not initiate conversation with men. Particularly not women with demon-possessed daughters. The social norm of the day would dictate that if a woman did this, the man should ignore her. In this case, Jesus follows the social norm. But the woman persists, calls him Lord and refers to Him as the Son of David, even though she is not Jewish. Then Jesus does something totally unexpected. He calls her a “dog.” We are stunned by his rudeness and apparent lack of charity. But the woman’s plea comes straight from her heart, out of her mouth and to the ears of God. She plays into Jesus’s metaphor and name calling by acknowledging that even dogs are cared for and provided for by their masters. Jesus rewards her faith by healing her daughter.

Our words and actions have the power to continue to hurt the world and are not washed away by the sewer. What impact do you expect that the words that leave your mouth on a daily basis have on the world around you? The Canaanite woman claims the action of God for herself even though tradition might have prevented her from doing so. Are there traditions that we as Christians insist on that might prevent the in-breaking action of the Kingdom? How do we live in that tension? Who is the outcast Canaanite woman of our day? Who is the one that we ignore when he or she cries for help? Is God’s mercy available to them?