

Genesis 45:1-15
Matthew 15:21-28

word count: 1,643

A young man slowly discovers he is different from his family and those around him, different in his dreams and his perceptions of the world. Soon, the family members closest to him discover his difference as well, and go about finding ways to exclude him, to drive him away.

The young man ends up in the big city, living an unconventional life amongst others, who, like him, have no rights. He found a way to survive and flourish through his own talents. He is handsome and desirable, and soon finds himself falsely accused of a sexual crime and is thrown in prison.

While in prison, it is revealed to those around him what sets him apart. He is creative, a dreamer of dreams and an interpreter as well; a visionary who can listen to your dream and tell you what it means.

This is the story of Joseph. Sold into slavery by his brothers, he ends up working for an officer of Pharaoh named Potiphar. He became a trusted and indispensable slave, and the object of desire of Potiphar's wife. When he refuses her invitation to be with her, she responds by making a false accusation against him, which lands him in jail. Once there, he interprets the dreams of fellow-prisoners.

Pharaoh has been having disturbing dreams, and his butler remembers how Joseph told him in prison that his own dream meant that he would be released, and so he tells Pharaoh about this remarkable servant who is in prison for a crime he did not commit. Joseph is summoned by Pharaoh; he listens and interprets the ruler's dreams of plenty and drought, and even leads Egypt with a plan to get them through good times and bad.

Eventually, his family comes to him for help. Joseph is generous and forgiving, and embraces those very persons who once wanted him dead. Oh, he's not perfect...there's an edge to him. He falsely plants evidence of theft on his youngest brother Benjamin, and he has all of the eleven brothers dragged back by guards to grovel in front of him in fear for their lives...but then *all* families have their ups and downs.

The story of Joseph is a story of reconciliation and acceptance. It is a lesson in how those who are oppressed should know so viscerally what oppression feels like, that once free of it, those victimized might recognize oppression in any other form and know to fight against it.

Most of all, though, the story of Joseph and his family is one of forgiveness. In that forgiveness, the importance of fairness, respect and love for the reconciled community is lifted up.

At the end of this story (Genesis 50:20) Joseph makes a statement that reflects a kind of determinism. Joseph says "You meant to do me harm; but God meant to bring good out of it by preserving the lives of many people as we see today."

In Africa, there is an ethic, a philosophy of focusing on people's allegiances and relations with each other called, "ubuntu."

Bishop Desmond Tutu once summed up the idea of ubuntu, by saying, "I cannot be without you." In an interview on Beliefnet, Tutu was asked about this, and he said, "Ubuntu is a concept that we have in our Bantu languages at home. Ubuntu is the essence of being a person. It means that we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are

made for interdependence; we are made for family. When you have ubuntu, you embrace others. You are generous, compassionate. If the world had more ubuntu, we would not have war. We would not have this huge gap between the rich and the poor. You are rich so that you can make up what is lacking for others. You are powerful so that you can help the weak, just as a mother or father helps their children. This is God's dream."

Author Mark Galli writes, "When we take the individual as the starting point, we can find no way to satisfy the basic yearning of the human heart, which has been created for communion.

"The question, 'Who am I' cannot be answered without first answering the question, 'Who are *we*?' We cannot conceive of ourselves (without stumbling into mere abstraction or doing violence to who we are) until we conceive of the other. At a very practical level, no human life can survive without the reciprocation of love. Thus, our primary duty in life is not to find ourselves, to develop our gifts, or to make sense of life. Instead, we are called to love others so that they can come into existence, while they do the same for us."¹

This is completely in line with the *Ubuntu* concept—that *a person is only a person through other persons*.

Next Sunday we will come into this room as a congregation to worship, to welcome new members and break bread with them, and to hopefully marvel and not balk at "Joseph's Sanctuary of Many Colors."

We will also meet as a community after worship and vote on a congregational resolution to stand opposed to a proposition that is aimed at removing the newly granted right for some of us to marry. You know where I stand on this. I am devoting time and energy along with member churches in the UCC and local progressive Orange County churches to showing that there is a different Christian response that is grounded in our long American tradition, from Pastor John Robinson's words to the departing pilgrims, "There is more light yet to break from God's word," to the familiar phrase alive in today's United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking." These words color our impressions on not only this issue, but on so many in how we see ourselves in relation to others in this world with what we have been given to know to be true today, and in what our dreams are for our future these many centuries after Joseph dreamed in a prison cell.

Perhaps you do not agree with me on this, or certainly about other things after this amount of time. But I know that for us to be in community, we constantly need each other's acceptance and forgiveness.

And perhaps there are some here who find that they hold an opposing view. The purpose of our taking a vote on an issue together as a congregation is never to divide. It is important for all of us to hold onto the concept of ubuntu—I cannot be without you. We cannot "Be" without you. We cannot conceive of ourselves until we conceive of the other. Bishop Tutu says that "We are called to love others so that they can come into existence, while they do the same for us." This is the beloved and inclusive community—we believe that by showing respect for all of its members. Parker Palmer once said that relationships, not facts and reason, are the key to reality. By entering those relationships, knowledge of reality is unlocked.



In the passage from Matthew, the theme of inclusive community plays out in the story of the Gentile woman who challenges Jesus to practice what he preaches. Earlier, Jesus has been challenging his listeners to put the heart before the various purity laws of the day. He says, "It is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles."

So, it is interesting that right after this teaching, we are given the story of a Gentile, non-Jewish, woman, whose first words to Jesus out of her mouth are pleas to him to heal her daughter. Just as Jesus invited the Pharisees to go beyond their tradition with regard to purity laws, the Gentile woman challenges Jesus to go beyond his own more slender understanding of his mission when he says, “I was sent only the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

Jesus may have been too narrowly focused. Maybe he had gotten caught up in his own particulars and he could not see the opportunity to partake in his own program being offered to him through this Gentile Canaanite woman. Thus, it is possible that Jesus himself needed to be challenged to open up.

When have we made false assumptions about people based on incomplete information and pre-judgments? Who have been some people or incidents that have caused us to think outside of our box? Someone once said, “The longest, most arduous trip in the world is often the journey from the head to the heart. Until that round trip is completed, we remain at war with ourselves. And, of course, those at war with themselves are apt to make casualties of others, including friends and loved ones.”

Did Jesus change his mind because of a challenge from outside? There is certainly a real challenge there for us. What groups of people are there who do not fit in with our preconceived notions of the Realm of God, and so we shove them aside, we exclude them from God’s Grace. Maybe they challenge us to think again, to change our notions and our strategies, which may have been perfectly acceptable at one time, but no longer fit the bill.

Like Jesus, Joseph was challenged by his community and how that community mirrored back what they saw in him. Joseph’s story is about family—about reconciliation, acceptance, forgiveness, respect and love for the gathered community in which he, and we as well, all live.

As Bishop Tutu once said, we are people through other people. We cannot be fully human alone. We are made for interdependence; we are made for family. Let’s remember the importance of the loving part we play in being the beloved community. I cannot be without you.

Sermon Resources

1. Mark Galli, “I Love, Therefore You Are: Why the modern search for self ends in despair.” Xnty Today, posted 6/28/2007

Scripture for Sunday, August 17, 2008

Genesis 45:1-15

1 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.

Matthew 15:21-28

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