

A Lectionary 20 8.20.23

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:[10-20] 21-28

Focus Statement: So that through you all the world shall be blessed

We did it, guys. Today is our last Sunday in the book of Genesis. By next Sunday, the Israelites are no longer one family, but a whole people. But before we get to where we're going, let's look back on where we've been. The Israelite people started as a man named Abram, whom we now know becomes Abraham, who was called by God to leave his country and his kindred and his father's house to the land that God would show him. Because, God promised, God would make of him a great nation, and God would bless him and make his name great, so that he would be a blessing... and that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed.

Remember that, that was a key detail of that reading. God's exclusive blessing of Abram is for the purpose of blessing the whole of creation. When we read that passage, we talked about how that can seem so contrary to how the world feels sometimes. If focus or blessing or attention goes to one person, then someone else must be being slighted. I hinted that we'd even see that in Abram/Abraham's own family. We also talked about how God telling Abram he was going to become a great nation was a promise that didn't come true in his lifetime. Or his children's lifetime, or his grandchildren's lifetime, or even, his great-grandchildren's lifetime. Next week we jump some fairly significant amount of time, and Abraham's descendants are a nation but their greatness could be debated, this promise takes time. But that's a bit of an aside, let's talk about blessing.

Over these last generations, we've seen things happen to Abraham and Sarah and their descendants that certainly seemed like blessing, seemed like God fulfilling God's promise to make of them a great nation. The birth of Isaac, for example, when Abraham and Sarah were both, in the not-so-subtle words of the writer of Genesis, advanced in years. Or Abraham's servant heading out to find a wife for Isaac and happening upon Rebekah, who was not just wife but partner. Or Jacob's dream promising God's continued presence. Other things felt less blessing-like, like Abraham and Sarah's treatment of Hagar and Ishmael, whatever Abraham was up to in nearly sacrificing Isaac, Jacob and Esau fighting in the womb, Jacob's deception of his brother, and his father, and his father-in-law. And of course, last week's story of the evil of Jacob's sons, how the brothers ganged up on their brother Joseph, Jacob's favorite, kidnaped him, considered killing him, and eventually selling him into slavery. There has been a lot these past few months that haven't felt very much like blessing. Sometimes because we wondered where God was in the stories, and sometimes because we wondered why God had chosen this obnoxious band of misfits to begin with.

But God did choose these misfits, and God stuck with them. And today we heard Joseph explain all that God had done to transform his brothers' misdeeds into the fulfillment of the promise God had made to their great-grandfather so many years before. Since the brothers last saw Joseph, through the result of his gift for dream interpretation and shrewd management skills, Joseph has risen from slave to second in command over all of Egypt. A famine is ravaging the land, but because Joseph predicted the famine and oversaw the storage of grain, Egypt was not only surviving the famine but thriving, while every other nation was starving. Eventually the famine reached Joseph's brothers and father back in

Canaan. Hearing there was food in Egypt, and not knowing the reason for that food was their brother, Jacob sent his sons to go and buy food. And there was a series of sort of weird interactions between the brothers, as Joseph recognized them and they didn't recognize him, before we get to Joseph revealing himself to them in today's passage. First Joseph gave them grain but made them leave Simeon until they returned with Benjamin. Benjamin being Rachel's second son, Joseph's only full brother. Then they returned with Benjamin and Joseph planted a cup in Benjamin's bag to make him look like a thief so he could arrest Benjamin and keep him in Egypt. I'd always wondered about those exchanges. Like, if Joseph was going to forgive his brothers, which he does, why the games? Why make them jump through a bunch of hoops first? But I thought of something this week, and let me caution this is the Gospel according to Kjersten so take it with a grain of salt, but here it is. These are the brothers that sold Joseph into slavery because they knew he was his father's favorite because of who his mother was. He and Benjamin have the same mother. What if arresting Benjamin and making his brothers plead for his return was a way to find out if his brothers had changed, and if they hadn't, to protect Benjamin from their wrath?

Because here's an important thing to remember about forgiveness, the ultimate goal of forgiveness is not forgetting. The ultimate goal of forgiveness is reconciliation. And in order for there to be reconciliation, both sides have to be on board. Letting someone perpetrate evil on yourself or someone else because you're supposed to forgive and forget is not forgiveness, it's abuse. Joseph can forgive his brothers, he can love his brothers, heck, he can even feed his brothers, sending them back home with not only ample grain but the money they brought to purchase it, but reconciliation can only happen if his brothers are no

longer the sorts of people so controlled by jealousy that they will sell each other into slavery.

Once Joseph saw that his brothers were different, he was able to show them all that God had done through him to provide for people through the famine. The brothers and their father returned to Egypt and reunited as a family, and could be together again. And this is again, the Gospel according to Kjersten, but I think if the brothers hadn't passed this test, the only thing that would have changed is Genesis would have then given us the sort of tidy summary it gave us for Ishmael and Esau for each of the brothers, and the promises would have continued through Joseph and Benjamin. Because if Genesis has shown us anything, it's that God's plan cannot be distracted by the foils and foibles of any one family. When God commits to a project, God sees that project through.

Which gets us to our Gospel, and one of the texts I probably dislike the most in the Gospels. I'll tell you I was tempted to preach on Joseph alone and ignore the Canaanite woman, but it feels like one of those texts you cannot in good conscious read and then not talk about, so here we go.

So this Canaanite woman, an outsider by both nationality and gender, came to Jesus begging that he would heal her daughter. And he, in a very un-Jesus way, said no. Which, when does Jesus ever say no to healing someone in need, even if the person was a woman, even if they were a gentile, even if they were whatever, Jesus never cared before. But for whatever reason, he said to her no, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Here's

the thing about that line. You may remember it from earlier in the summer, when Jesus sent the disciples out to preach, teach, and heal. He told them to stay only among the house of Israel as well. When we read that passage we talked about how that was a practicality issue. The disciples were still learning how to be disciples, they needed to grow into the work before they moved beyond Israel. We know the mission is to spread beyond Israel, Jesus Great Commission after his resurrection is very clear that they are to go to all nations, baptizing and teaching everything Jesus had commanded them. But just like you don't teach a kid to swim by throwing them off the deep end and saying, good luck, figure it out, Jesus started his disciples off with the missionary version of pool floaties by keeping them among their own people.

There's also the issue of time. Remember Jesus is incarnate in his ministry, he's in the flesh. This means he's bound by the same, can only be in one place and do so much issues that we face as humans. Until he's ascended into heaven, he really cannot be everywhere at once and everything to all people. He has to pick and choose who and how he will serve, just like we do.

But this Canaanite woman was like, you're more than you know. I know who you are, I've seen what you can do, and I know you can do this too. This woman demanded that Jesus be Jesus, that Jesus be who God had sent him to be, and care for her daughter. Joy J. Moore, who is a professor out of Luther Seminary, said this week that maybe Jesus allowed this scene to occur, made sure the writer of Matthew captured it, so that we could see the courage of the Canaanite woman and know that it was ok to challenge, to push back, to

demand a different course of action. That reconciliation can be forgiveness, and it can also be demanding what you deserve, what you know to be right, so that those in need can prosper.

These passages offer us two paths to reconciliation. Joseph was prepared to provide for his brothers either way, but seeing they had changed paved the path to reconciliation. He didn't forget the past, but named it, "I am your brother, whom you sold into Egypt," as a path to move forward. The Canaanite woman offers a different model. In her we see the courage to stick it out, to refuse to be budged, until the system lives up to what it is capable of, what it has promised, life for all. There are times, dear people of God, for both forms of forgiveness. For moving away from and for pressing into. For rebuilding relationship through vulnerability, and for doing so through strength. I wish these texts gave us a nice, step-by-step format for rebuilding relationships and treating all people with dignity and respect, but scripture rarely gives us things in such tidy forms. What these stories give us, what scripture always gives us, is a God who always finds a way to bring blessing. In brothers who grow and women who demand, in challenge and in change. Thanks be to God, who is always blessing, even when it super doesn't feel like blessing. Amen.