

Sermon – “A Momentous Encounter”

Scripture – Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15:10-28

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Blythe Denham Kieffer, D.Min.

Westminster Presbyterian Church

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Our first scripture reading Genesis 45:1-15 is a culminating scene in the story of Joseph, one of Jacob’s twelve sons. This passage is intriguing from a purely literary standpoint, for it portrays Joseph in a moment of triumph. The trials of the past are over, and his trembling brothers – whose evil intentions sent him to Egypt in the first place—are now in his power. But instead of venting on them a wrathful spirit, Joseph acknowledges God’s hand in the events of his life and –in a powerful emotional scene—is reconciled to those who attempted to do him harm (*James Newsome, Texts for Preaching*). Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*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; God 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. Amen.*

With Joseph’s story of God’s mysterious and merciful ways fresh in our minds we turn to our second scripture reading –Matthew 15:21-28. In today’s gospel we witness a momentous encounter between Jesus and a Canaanite woman revealing a glimpse of misogyny and prejudice even within the One who gave his life to break down all barriers among people. Following the encounter, Jesus sees this woman not as a foreigner but as a sister and extends God’s mercy to her. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*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 Jesus did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." 24 Jesus 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. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "A Momentous Encounter"

*Text: 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. Genesis 45:4*

Let us pray: We are grateful, Holy, and loving God, for the encounters in life that help us see ourselves more clearly and understand your mercy more fully. As we reflect on Scripture together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Both of our scripture readings highlight a momentous encounter that is life changing. In each decisive confrontation, Joseph with his brothers and Jesus with the Canaanite woman, we learn something about one's character and God's mercy. Each of us, no doubt, can recall a momentous encounter that changed our lives, deepened our understanding of ourselves, and widened our experience of God's unfathomable mercy.

The encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman which follows Christ's teaching on the importance of the words we speak makes us uncomfortable, to say the least. Some theologians have emphasized that Jesus is simply stating the priority of his mission to Israel in this passage, which highlights the continuity between Judaism and Christ's ministry. And yet, one cannot ignore or overlook the misogynistic words that come out of Jesus' mouth. They stick in our throats – *It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.*

I remember the first time I was called a dog. It didn't feel good. My girlfriend, Michelle, and I were walking home from Thornridge High School our freshman year and passed some boys at football practice. One of them started barking at us as we walked by. Michelle and I were both appalled and found a new route home.

It was not uncommon during Jesus' time for Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs. Dehumanizing those we disdain to rationalize our inhumane feelings is a defense mechanism used historically among peoples with longstanding prejudices. It is still prevalent today. It is much more difficult to hate a person for the color of their skin, their nationality, or their religion when we encounter them face to face within in a relationship, when we work side by side, or when we break bread together in table fellowship.

I am grateful for those early followers of Jesus who included this awkward story in the Gospel of Matthew. A parallel story is also found in Mark's gospel. By including this encounter, we see a very human Jesus who may have been surprised himself and a little embarrassed at the condescending words that came out of his mouth to this foreign woman. They reveal the long-standing hatred and prejudice between the Jews and Gentiles that had been nurtured for centuries and we are reminded of the truth spoken by Nelson Mandela:

*No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if we can learn to hate, we can be taught to love...*

This momentous encounter serves as a segway to Jesus' expanded ministry to the gentiles in the Gospel of Matthew. It is a turning point in the life of Jesus when he saw more clearly the prejudice of his culture even within himself. The surprising response of this persistent woman (who surely had been called many names during her lifetime) offers insight to our Lord. The poise and resolve in her response, *"Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from*

*their masters' table*" provides an opportunity for Christ to gain understanding. He offers his sister the mercy that God intends for each of us, regardless of race, color, gender, sexual orientation, or religion.

If we learn from this momentous encounter in our gospel reading that God's mercy extends beyond race, religion, family, and kin, our Genesis reading reminds us that God's mercy is also intended for those within our family—even the ones who betray us and intend evil for us.

When Joseph recognized the foreigners who came to him for food during a time of famine, he came face to face in a momentous encounter with the brothers who betrayed him. Joseph's character and his faith developed through the hardships, injustices and disappointments that began the day his brothers sold him into slavery. Rejection and disappointment have a way of helping us find out who we really are. Joseph had come a long way since he shared his dream as a little boy that his brothers would bow before him.

On the day of their momentous reunion, Joseph's tears reveal the joy of being reunited with his brothers and the realization that behind all the events of his life, God has been at work to bring good out of evil –to use Joseph's life to save the lives of many including his own family. On the day of this momentous encounter, Joseph sees how God has woven his painful experiences of betrayal into the tapestry of his life. Joseph will later say to the brothers he forgave: *Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good.* On this momentous day, Joseph's brothers, not unlike the Canaanite woman, experience the unfathomable mercy of God's grace.

Joseph is a paradigm of what the grace and mercy of God can do in human life: transfigure a curse into a blessing, revenge into forgiveness, and hatred into love. However, Joseph is more than this, according to Dr. Walter Brueggemann, Joseph is himself a metaphor for God, a Christ figure. The One whom they thought was dead is alive! The One who had every reason to reject a wayward foreign family, loves them even to the point of participating in their suffering.

May we, like Joseph, listen to our dreams and understand that God weaves the painful experiences of our lives into a tapestry of many colors and meaning. May we, like our Savior, listen to the words we speak unexpectedly, words that offer insight into the prejudice and hatred we have learned, and then, by grace of God, may we extend the mercy we have been given to one another. Amen.