

Sermon – “The Gift of Insight”

Scripture – Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15:10-11, 21-28

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Our first scripture reading found in Genesis 45:1-15 is the culminating passage of the story of this dreamer when Joseph confronts his brothers with his identity. The foreigner standing before them, who has amazing power over their lives, is no foreigner at all. Joseph is their brother, the one they betrayed! As Joseph breaks down and weeps with his family, they are stunned and speechless. Joseph's tears reveal the joy of being reunited with his brothers and the realization that behind all the events of Joseph's 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. His dreams have offered the gift of insight and now we also understand the meaning of the dreams he had as a young boy –that his brothers would someday bow before him. 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 15:10-11, 21-28. This passage begins with Jesus addressing the crowd and his disciples following a confrontation with the Pharisees about a hand washing ritual. Jesus is clearly more concerned with the words that come out of one's mouth than with the food that goes into it. Ironically, in the passage that follows Jesus speaks cruel words to a foreign woman that reveal the prejudice between the Jews and the Gentiles. In today's gospel we see a glimpse of this prejudice even within the One who gave his life to break down all barriers among people. In the honest and genuine interaction that follows, Jesus sees this woman in a new way, not as a foreigner but as a sister. Once again we experience God's mysterious and merciful ways. Hear now God's Holy Word.

10 Then Jesus called the crowd to him and said to them, "Listen and understand: 11 it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles..." 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: "The Gift of Insight"

Let us pray: We are grateful, merciful God, for the experiences and interactions in life that help us see you and ourselves more clearly. As we reflect on scripture together, may the words of my mouth and the meditations and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I remember very vividly reading this interaction between Jesus and the Canaanite woman when I was in high school. I was uncomfortable with this passage then, even as I am today. In fact, I was so uncomfortable with Jesus being portrayed in this insensitive light, as a teenager, that I took my red pen and put an X through the passage. I still have my J.B. Phillips Bible with the verses crossed out. You see, this didn't fit my understanding of who Jesus was. At that time in my life, my way of dealing with things that didn't neatly fit into my view of the world was symbolically (or not so symbolically in this case) to cross them out, ignore them, overlook them. Limited as my world view may have been I was comfortable with my perspective and did not welcome anyone or anything that might threaten that level of comfort.

Ironically, as I look back on my life I learned this defense mechanism, this way of coping from the people who nurtured my faith in the First Reformed Church of South Holland, Illinois. Little did I know then that one day I would become someone who threatened their world view and who would need to be crossed out, ignored, overlooked. As a young woman, when I announced that I believed I was called to the ordained ministry, I not only fell from grace, I fell out of the picture of the way things were supposed to be. (The Reformed Church of America did not ordain women at that time. Today, they do.)

When I personally experienced the pain of being crossed out, for the first time in my life I became aware that this way of coping, although it may make life simpler, can be very limiting and hurtful. Needless to say, this defense mechanism is not limited to a Reformed Church in South Holland, Illinois or a teenage girl seriously reading Scripture for the first time. We all do it. If we each took the time to look within and examine our world view we would see a series of X's along the way, creating the picture with which we are comfortable. We all have our bias', our prejudices, our feelings of partiality, our favorite children. We all have opinions of how things should be, based on our particular life experience and family heritage. This is not surprising! It becomes hurtful and limiting when we deny our partiality, "cross" it out, so to speak, to put ourselves in a better light. When we do this we deny ourselves the truth and the opportunity to learn from and grow beyond our limited perspective. We deny ourselves "the gift of insight."

I am grateful for those early followers of Jesus who did not feel compelled to cross out this awkward story in the Gospel of Matthew. A parallel story is also found in Mark's gospel. By including this interaction, 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. Perhaps this was a turning point in the life of Jesus when he saw more clearly, even within his own heart, the hatred and prejudice that had been nurtured between the Jews and Gentiles for centuries.

Could this be a moment of grace in the life of our Savior? The surprising response of this persistent and perceptive woman (who surely had been called many names during her lifetime) enlightens our Lord. From this outsider, Jesus grew in his understanding of himself and of the mysterious and merciful ways of the God whom he called father. He was moved by this woman's faith.

Some theologians have emphasized that Jesus is simply stating the priority of his mission to Israel in this passage, especially in Matthew's gospel, which highlights the connection and continuity between Judaism and Christ's ministry. And yet, one cannot cross out, ignore or overlook the 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.*

It was not uncommon during Jesus' time for Jews to refer to Gentiles as dogs. This is a typical defense mechanism among people with long-standing prejudices. We dehumanize those we disdain to rationalize our inhumane feelings. We still do it today. It is much more difficult to hate a person for the color of their skin, their nationality or their religion when we come face to face with them in a relationship, when we work side by side or when we break bread together in table fellowship. It is in these unexpected partnerships and kinships that we experience the mysterious and merciful ways of God who ordains a blessing when kindred live together in unity.

Westminster has seen the progression of racial hatred in our country from our beginnings in 1835 as an abolitionist church, to our witness of the 1908 Springfield Race Riot the year we dedicated this gracious sanctuary...and even today, with our hearts pouring out to those not far away in Ferguson, Missouri, who are mourning the loss of a teenage son. One could not help but see a glimpse of God's grace in the solidarity of Ferguson native Capt. Ron Johnson marching alongside protesters on Thursday, validating their pain, giving voice to their complaint and reassuring them they will not be ignored, overlooked or crossed out.

We, at Westminster, are a part of God's mysterious and merciful ways as we build solidarity within the relationships we foster through ministry and mission. When our Senior High work side by side with the rural poor in Brighton, Tennessee repairing their homes, when our members prepare and serve a meal to the homeless men at Helping Hands Ministry and when we build relationships and break bread with at-risk children from Graham Elementary School in the Compass Program, it's a lot harder for us to ignore, to overlook or to cross out the impoverished, the hungry and the homeless. In these acts of justice and compassion, we begin to see more clearly how we can break down the subtle barriers of racism within our community and ourselves. As our worldview expands, our insight grows. We see others and ourselves more clearly!

When Joseph recognized the foreigners who came to him for food during a time of famine, he found an unexpected kinship with a part of his life he had long crossed off. He came face to face with the brothers who betrayed him. The irony of reading Joseph's story with the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman is how partiality also plays a significant role in Joseph's story. He was his father's favorite continuing the cycle of a dysfunctional family, which lacks insight and so never changes. Remember Jacob was also his mother's favorite. This partiality serves no one well in a family. In Joseph's family, it created a self-indulgent little boy and some very bitter, older brothers who were, quite frankly, out of control.

Joseph's character 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. On the day of their reunion Joseph understands that God's hand has been a part of these hardships to bring him to a position where he can save lives –and now he understands God was preparing him to save his family. Through the gift of insight Joseph is able to see how God has woven these painful experiences into the tapestry of his life. Joseph will later say to the brothers he forgave: *Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.*

Joseph is a paradigm of what the grace of God can do in human life: transform a curse into a blessing, revenge into forgiveness and hatred into love. But Joseph is more than this, according to 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 them as outsiders, loves them even to the point of participating in their suffering.

May we continue to grow in the gift of insight –as we open ourselves to the outsider, to the voice of those we least expect –because sometimes those who have known rejection and sorrow know the nature of God better than we do. They have a way of graciously reminding us of a love beyond our limited perspective, a love that can give us the courage to embrace those events and people we have previously ignored, overlooked or crossed out. By the grace of God, may it be so. Amen.