

A Sermon for the Tenth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 15A
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In the reading from Genesis, the soap opera of the descendants of Abraham continues. Joseph, condemned to slavery in Egypt by his envious brothers, becomes Pharaoh's chief of staff. When famine strikes the land, his brothers are forced to ask for help from Pharaoh, making an awful choice between slavery and starvation. And are they ever surprised when the person they have to ask for help is none other than Joseph! What kind of vengeance will their now-powerful brother exact? Surprises lie ahead for all concerned....

But as compelling as the drama of Joseph and his brothers is, it is followed by a reading from Matthew's gospel that is nothing short of stunning. Did Jesus really say that? "It is not right to give the children's food to the dogs." After he just finished telling his disciples that it is what comes out of your mouth that makes you unclean. Is Jesus trying to show what he means by example? Or maybe he's demonstrated for us what has become our Christology – our belief that Jesus is fully human and fully divine – by showing himself capable of the petty and the miraculous in the span of a few moments. Or, at least showing that he still has a few things to learn.

In my experience, no matter how much he'd like to, a preacher can't leave one of these "hard sayings of Jesus" unremarked, because once something like that is in the air, nobody hears much of what comes after until it is dealt with.

But here's a thing these two stories have in common. Everyone in both of these stories enters these complicated interactions with expectations and

fears about what the other person will say and do. Joseph's brothers are awfully afraid of Joseph. They know that they have wronged him terribly, and they know that if they were in his position of power and privilege they themselves would exact an equally terrible price before helping them, if indeed he helped them at all.

The Canaanite woman, on the other hand, comes to Jesus if not expecting kindness, at least hoping for it. She has heard that he is a powerful healer – she believes that Jesus is her daughter's last chance – and so she comes in need, just as desperate as Joseph's brothers, but looking for kindness.

And as we know, everyone is surprised. Joseph, who has been made wise and kind by his unexpected good fortune, approaches his brothers alone, as he was when last they met, and instead of giving his brothers the vengeance they fear, or the justice they deserve, he gives them what they ask for and more, welcoming, embracing and providing for his brothers and their families.

Jesus, on the other hand, first ignores the woman, then rebukes and insults her, giving her not what she asked for but what she no doubt feared – the exact response, in fact, that the biblical purity codes demanded of Jesus: that he not talk to women or treat with strangers lest he be ritually defiled according to the system that Jesus has just been preaching against.

Quite a dilemma for Jesus. He has been teaching his followers that it is not your diet that makes you impure, but your words and actions, and he is immediately asked to say and do things that, by the book, will make him impure.

But the woman, who must now know that she has no hope of success and therefore nothing to lose, does the only thing possible short of giving up. She presses harder. If she can't have the whole loaf, she'll take the crumbs. What good to ask for anything else or go anywhere else when the one thing her daughter needs is right here before her?

And in that moment, the Canaanite woman and Joseph's brothers are quite a bit alike. With no claim whatsoever on the good will of the one they approach, this mother and these brothers still ask for what they need.

This is, whether we remember it or not, the way we always approach God. One does not need to embrace Augustine's theology of original sin or Calvin's doctrine of total human depravity to recognize that when we approach God asking for what we need, we have no claim on God's good will. God does not "owe us" our daily bread, or forgiveness, or salvation, or any of the many things, large and small, that we pray for on a regular basis.

Indeed, it is for this reason that so many of our formal prayers begin with a recollection of one or more of God's generous and mighty deeds in the past:

O God, who is always giving...or doing...or who once gave or did...

We ask that you do the same for us....

God, you are ever slow to anger and quick to forgive,

Forgive us and do not be angry...

O God who freed Israel from bondage in Egypt,

Free us from our own bondage to sin...

O God, who inspired your prophets of old to speak wisdom to your people,

Fill us with wisdom for our own age...

You know the formula. Our Prayer Book is filled with similar prayers, prayers where we seem to be reminding God of whom God is, but that actually remind us that we have no claim on God's goodness, only the hope and faith that God will keep on being God, and will continue to bless and feed and save us.

And here is where the two stories really converge. Jesus and Joseph, both acting on God's behalf – and we should remember whether we are asking or being asked that most of God's blessings are delivered through human hands – Jesus and Joseph both provide more than what they had been asked for. Joseph's brothers, hoping to avoid starvation, end up with abundance. The woman, hoping for healing for her daughter, receives affirmation of her own faith as well. God gives with an open hand, giving us not just what we ask for, but what we hope for, and even what we are not yet wise enough to hope for. Indeed, with every gift that God sends our way, God also gives us God – divine love, divine presence, divine inspiration, divine hope.

So the lesson from both these stories may be that we should never be afraid to ask God for what we need. Indeed, with the woman in the gospel lesson's example, we should ask repeatedly and insistently. We are to ask, not out of confidence in our deserving, but out of faith in God's generosity and love.

But sometimes we don't get what we ask for, do we? Sometimes, we know, at least in hindsight, that's because we are asking for the wrong things.

Often, though, we don't see the healing or the peace or the joy that we pray for because the humans God depends on to answer those prayers just aren't doing their job. Maybe we need to begin our prayers with a reminder that we too are capable of mighty acts of love and generosity as well.

And sometimes, what we ask for is just impossible. Not every wound can be healed. Human bodies weren't designed to live forever. Broken relationships are sometimes too broken to repair.

But even in those, our hardest of times, Joseph and Jesus and God are there to remind us that the other gift – the unasked for one – of God's presence by our side, of God's love for each of us, of God's desire to gather us together into one holy family – is always given, even when what we ask for is not.

Let us pray.

O God, you hear our prayers, and in your wisdom bless us with gifts better than the things we desire: Pour our your blessings on us so that, like Joseph's brothers and the Canaanite woman, we may know the abundance of your grace and the joy of your embrace; through Jesus your divine and human child, who lives and reigns with the Holy Spirit, One God, now and for ever.

Amen.