

Sermon – “Listen and Understand”

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

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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 15:10-28. 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 interaction 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. As she becomes a means of God’s grace to Jesus, Jesus extends God’s mercy to her. 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." 12 Then the disciples approached and said to him, "Do you know that the Pharisees took offense when they heard what you said?" 13 He answered, "Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be uprooted. 14 Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.[a] And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit." 15 But Peter said to him, "Explain this parable to us." 16 Then he said, "Are you also still without understanding? 17 Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer? 18 But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this is what defiles. 19 For out of the heart come evil intentions, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander. 20 These are what defile a person, but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile."

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** 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: "Listen and Understand"

Text: 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." Matthew 15:10-11

Let us pray: We are grateful, Holy and loving God, for the experiences and interactions 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 and thoughts of each of our hearts and minds be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

In light of current events, today's gospel reading is particularly poignant. Some of us may have seen Tina Fey on Saturday Night Live's Summer Edition this week. A University of Virginia graduate herself, she suggests one way to protest the bigotry being spewed in the town of her alma mater is to support a local bakery, buy a sheet cake with an American flag on it, and begin eating one's anger and frustration away. She calls the act of protest "sheet caking!" Besides the comic relief (although some took offense and, perhaps, rightly so), the image of her stuffing her face resonated with me.

Who among us has not eaten away our sorrows, our frustrations, even our boredom from time to time? If only we were blessed with the metabolism of our youth, this is an activity in which we could indulge more often.

Somehow this visual of stuffing one's face speaks to the truth Jesus was communicating following his interaction with the Pharisees. What is in our hearts is not revealed by what we put into our mouths. It is the words we speak that tell the tales of who we are and what we believe.

Even as our culture is obsessed with an excess of supersize food, I would submit to you that our culture has also lost its filter on the words that come out of our mouths. Besides the unfiltered biases and hatred that people feel free to spew these days, the vulgar language that is being espoused is also particularly disturbing. What are we teaching our children? I confess that I have fallen into being too lax with the words that flow from my mouth and invite us all to listen and understand Christ's timely message.

The interaction 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 connection and continuity between Judaism and Christ's ministry. And yet, one cannot 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.

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 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. 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...

Perhaps this was a turning point in the life of Jesus when he saw more clearly, even within his own heart, the prejudice of his culture. The surprising response of this persistent woman (who surely had been called many names during her lifetime) offers insight to our Lord. Her resolve provided an opportunity for Christ to listen and to understand. He does so with grace and 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 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 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. 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. In retrospect, Joseph sees 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.* On this day, God's mercy reappears to Joseph's brothers like the brightness of the sun after a total eclipse.

Joseph is a paradigm of what the grace of God can do in human life: transfigure a curse into a blessing, revenge into forgiveness and hatred into love. But 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 give us understanding to the prejudice and hatred we have learned, and, then by the grace of God, may we be taught to love one another as Christ loves each one of us. Amen.