



Making Sure the Right Thing Breaks

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sarah Hedgis

The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost ~ August 16, 2020

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph was no longer able hold back his feelings in front of his attendants, and he cried out to them, “Leave me!” So no one was present when Joseph made himself known to his brothers—but he wept so loudly that all of his Egyptian attendants heard him, and the news of it reached the Pharaoh’s palace. Joseph said to his brothers, “It is I—Joseph! Is my father really still alive?” The brothers could not answer, so dumbfounded were they.

Then Joseph said to the brothers, “Come closer to me.” When they had come closer he said to them, “I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt! Please don’t rebuke yourselves for having sold me here. God sent me here ahead of you so that I could save your lives. There has been famine in the land for two years, and for the next five years there will be no tilling and no harvesting. But God sent me ahead of you to guarantee that you will have descendants on earth and to keep you alive as a great body of survivors.

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God! God has made me Pharaoh’s chief counselor, the head of his household and governor of all Egypt. Hurry back to our father and give him this message from Joseph: ‘God has made me governor of all of Egypt. Come to me here at once! Do not delay. You will live here near me in the territory of Goshen, you, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all your possessions. I will provide for you here—for the next five years will be years of famine—so that you and your children and all that you own will be spared from destitution.’

“You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother, Benjamin, that it is I who speak to you. Report to our father about how I am honored here in Egypt, and about everything you have seen. Go quickly, now, and bring my father to me!” Joseph threw his arms around Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him and wept too. Then he kissed his other brothers, weeping over them as well, and then he and his brothers talked.

Psalm 133

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| 1 Oh, how good and pleasant it is, *
when kindred live together in unity! | 4 It is like the dew of Hermon *
that falls upon the hills of Zion. |
| 2 It is like fine oil upon the head *
that runs down upon the beard, | 5 For there has God ordained the blessing: *
life for evermore. |
| 3 Upon the beard of Aaron, *
and runs down upon the collar of his robe. | |

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected the chosen people? Of course not! I myself am an Israelite, descended from Sarah and Abraham, of the tribe of Benjamin. No, God has not rejected the chosen people, who were foreknown long ago.

For God’s gift and call are irrevocable. Just as you were once disobedient to God and now have received mercy through Israel’s disobedience, now they have become disobedient—since God wished to show you mercy—that they too may receive mercy. God has imprisoned everyone in disobedience in order to have mercy on everyone.

Matthew 15:10-28

Jesus called the crowd together and said to them, “Hear this and understand: it’s not what enters your mouth that defiles you—it’s what comes out of your mouth that defiles you.” Then the disciples approached him and said, “Do you realize that the Pharisees were offended by what you said?” Jesus replied, “Every plant that my Abba God in heaven has not planted will be pulled up by the roots. Ignore them—they are blind people leading other blind people. And when the blind lead the blind, they all will fall into a ditch.”

Then Peter said to him, “Explain this parable to us.” Jesus replied, “Do you still not understand? Don’t you realize that everything that goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and eventually finds its way into the sewer and is gone? But what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart. This is what makes a person ‘unclean.’ For from the heart come all sorts of evil intentions—murder, sexual infidelity, promiscuity, stealing, lying, even foul language. These things make a person unclean—not eating with unwashed hands!”

Jesus left there and departed for the district of Tyre and Sidon. It happened that a Canaanite woman living in that area came and cried out to Jesus, "Heir to the House of David, have pity on me! My daughter is horribly demon-possessed." Jesus gave her no word of response. The disciples came up and repeatedly said to him, "Please get rid of her! She keeps calling after us." Finally Jesus turned to the woman and said, "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." She then prostrated herself before him with the plea, "Help me, Rabbi!" He answered, "But it isn't right to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." "True, Rabbi," she replied, "but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table." Jesus then said in reply, "Woman, you have great faith! Your wish will come to pass." At that very moment her daughter was healed.

This week, I've been super focused on a project that's part of my post-graduate work in marriage and family therapy. I'm applying different therapy theories and models to my and Roger's families, and the big chunk of this project is mapping out each of our families, going back four generations.

But instead of looking like an orderly family tree, you connect family members based on the type of relationship they had with each other: Did they feel safe and secure? Did they want connection but it was inconsistent? Did connection seem too unavailable, so they just gave up? Was the relationship seriously harmed, leaving one or both of the people too disoriented to connect?

Creating this family connections map is powerful. Tracking patterns across generations. Remembering stories I've lived and also those passed down to me. Seeing how past events influence how our families function today. It is powerful, but it is also so, so much.

Getting both a broader and deeper picture like that is overwhelming. I simultaneously felt like I was discovering a whole new world, but also that I already knew these dynamics and scripts and unspoken rules, even if I don't know when or how I learned them. So much of how we live as a family we've never consciously thought about. It was just...us. Just life or truth or the way things are.

That's what plays out in our gospel reading today, when Jesus is approached and then reproached by a woman who begs him to heal her daughter. In my sermon about the feeding of the 5,000 families two weeks ago, I talked about how Jesus' miracles did not live above the world's trauma, but were born out of it. As a first-century poor uneducated Jewish man living in a brutal client state with an unchecked priestly aristocracy under the Roman occupation, Jesus was a politically, economically, and religiously traumatized person. Jesus' own lived experiences of over-taxing the poor, both by the Temple and by Caesar, influenced his desire to show the 5,000 hungry families how the kin-dom of God operates in a divine economy of abundance, where all have what they need.

In today's story, this same lived experience leads Jesus to discriminate against someone seeking the kin-dom of God.

Why? Because the one seeking him is a Canaanite woman. This distinction goes back way more than four generations of Jesus' family tree. "Canaanite" is an ethnic catch-all term used in the Bible that means "not us" - not chosen, not included. Now, Jesus' response to this woman would not have been particularly scandalous (it was much more scandalous for her to seek him out and call him Lord), but his response does remind us that part of being fully human is carrying the stories and traumas and prejudices passed on to us and, so very often, doing so in a way that just "is" - unaware and unremarkable.

However, there are moments when the subconscious becomes conscious. This usually happens when we find ourselves in a place where we know what we should do or even want to do, but also get the sense there may be another way.

We don't have details about this moment for Jesus. But we do for Joseph in our Old Testament reading.

Joseph stands before his brothers who betrayed him, finally looks down on them as the right-hand man to Pharaoh, like they looked down on him in that pit before selling him into slavery when he was a teenager. This is his reckoning day. When he can avenge himself against the half-brothers who could not love him, Joseph - their youngest brother, the only son of Rachel. It all makes sense. I can see the complicated lines between these brothers in my mind.

But then something new pushes in: Benjamin. Another brother. The youngest brother who they do love. Who, they believe, is the only remaining son of Rachel. Joseph is understandably hurt, confused, and jealous, but he is also curious. This solid line of love and security between Benjamin and his brothers introduces something new to Joseph. And we can imagine all that floods into his mind: These brothers could love. The youngest one could be accepted. And he has another brother! And a realization about himself: he is not alone or helpless anymore.

Above all, it seems to introduce the possibility of a new way, a different choice for Joseph. One that speaks to the feelings that live just beneath his understandable anger and desire for justice: those deeper feelings of hurt, abandonment, fear.

These new choices are not the same for everyone. And the new choice is not always the best or appropriate one. It is the shift - the ability to see there is always more than one choice - that is important. To recognize that the way things are did not come from nowhere, to take a deeper look at the map that got us here, and to decide if that is where we want to continue to go, what we want to pass on.

The unnamed Canaanite woman offers Jesus a different choice that reveals his own passed down prejudice that prevents the kin-dom he preaches from taking root. What's more, Jesus is able to hear and receive it.

Just like Joseph probably remembered and retold the story of that day with his brothers, I wonder how often Jesus thought or talked about that woman and the gift of a different way she gave him. How did receiving new life change him, when he was so used to being the one offering it? Was her face in his mind as he continued his ministry, when he taught, healed, argued, broke bread, was crucified? And what is it like for us to bring this story of Jesus being wrong, being human, being able to change into our own lives?

As we picture those stories and families and lines in our own minds, what larger and deeper picture are we able to see? Jesus' choice doesn't automatically fix everything - Paul wrestles with our desire to mark who is in and who is out in our Epistle reading. We still wrestle today. I'm struck by the impossible situation the Canaanite woman finds herself in - desperate, inferior in ethnicity and gender, likely exhausted from caring for her daughter. And yet, in the ethnic lines and power structure of her time, she must also be the teacher and leader if she has any hope in changing the ways things are. She has to be just as powerful, wise, and calm as Jesus is, even as he reprimands and disparages her.

This unfair burden is still placed on the vulnerable today. Women must remember and disclose every second of their abuse. Migrants must speak English. Black people must give white people a step-by-step action plan for dismantling a system they neither created nor have ever benefited from. All to break into the assumptions of privilege and try to show a different way. In seeing these patterns and stories, we are offered a choice: Is this how we want to continue?

I want to name what we all know: This work is not easy and many of us are very, very tired. I am tired. There was an evening earlier this week when, after working on this family project all day, I felt totally overwhelmed. Taking in all of the different stories, seeing how experiences moved our families forward and also held people back - real people, with real whole lives that were controlled by a failed relationship or an unresolved conflict. I couldn't shake how interconnected we are, whether we realize it or not. Whether we want to be or not. I couldn't come to terms with just how fragile our relationships and systems are, even the ones that seem the most rigid and powerful.

If we follow these lines, can we handle what we discover or have to re-think? Are we actually willing to make a different choice? Will the whole thing break apart? It's enough to make you put the project away, to never reveal yourself to the brothers who stand before you or pretend you don't hear the voice of an unnamed Canaanite

woman calling you to change. But this doesn't get rid of anything - it just removes your choice in how to respond. Unaddressed pain will always pass on more pain. Addressing that pain can help reunite, grow, heal, make right. This is difficult, but it's also where new choices break in.

On a call with local faith leaders a few weeks ago, a pastor reminded us of the gospel song, "Something has to break." He said, "We are living in a time when it feels like everything could break: white supremacy, yes, but also our democracy, our economy, our faith. We are at a point where systems have been pushed too far and people have been stretched too thin. My friends, something has to break. Something will break. Our calling in this moment is to make sure it's the right thing that breaks." May it be so. Amen.