

Tenth Sunday After Pentecost - John Brittingham

Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28

And so it came to pass that the guy who is most comfortable cracking wise is the one upon whom the joke is made. Of course I, the only child, have to preach on the passage about a bunch of siblings being brought back together. Of course this week would have one of Scripture's most innocuous Psalms: "Isn't unity great, you guys! Also, beards." And of course this week the philosopher more comfortable with jokes than with poetry has to talk about reconciliation when things are anything but reconciled right in our backyard, in Ferguson, MO. Wouldn't last week's "name your accusers" work so much better this week? Wouldn't Amanda's great sermon about saying, "Hey, the enemy and the victim are not so diametrically opposed, everything is kind of messy, all parties are guilty of *something* (except God who is awesome)" work better in the shadow of local militarized police action and racial injustice?

Well, maybe not. What I love about the passages this week—and the Joseph story in particular—is that the most interesting things happen in between the lines, or in between the passages. What I find fascinating is how what happens between last week's Genesis passage and this week's is incredibly important for making sense of the two passages. Indeed, sometimes what happens in between big events, in that messy space in the middle, is more important than the events themselves. Sure, we remember the big events and reminisce about them, but when we focus only on those events we miss the struggle and the work it took to get from one event to another. So let's look at this Joseph passage a bit more in depth to tease out just what is going on in between the passages.

When last we saw Joseph he was in the bottom of a pit. His brothers were talking above him about what to do, "Should we kill him? Should we sell him? Hey look, there are some traders headed to Egypt." This is the last verse of last week's passage: *When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.*

Make a note about those twenty pieces of silver—silver is an important part of this story. Flash forward to Joseph kicking everyone out of the room except his brothers and crying about them and hanging on everyone's neck all weepy and happy. Everyone's back together. You can just see all those emotive, knowing looks they're giving to each other—like all the characters do in each of the five endings to *The Return of the King*. Except, if we are paying attention, it seems a little bit weird that at one moment Joseph is overhearing his brothers discuss the murder or sale of his personage and at the next moment they're all getting their reconciliatory rocks off.

What happened in between these two passages is more than just Joseph's *The Graduate* moment—"Are you trying to seduce me, Mrs. Potiphar?"—and more than "I'm rich and powerful now so it's all good, bros." What happens in between is fascinating and speaks to the difficult work that is reconciliation. It also speaks, the same way our gospel lesson does, to these Bible heroes actually being something human. That is, in both the Joseph story and in the Gospel lesson, our protagonists appear to have both some serious character flaws and to change their minds.

That said, what happened to Joseph during the in-between years? (I like to refer to them as the “montage years,” complete with an inspirational 80’s legwarmer music soundtrack.) Joseph is a slave, works his way into Potiphar’s house and then goes all young Dustin Hoffman—but not really. He’s back in jail and then he goes all Kevin Spacey in *House of Cards*—but, you know, not evil. (It’s not the full Spacey. Nobody should ever go Full Spacey.) And then, he’s the weird agricultural sabermetric genius with a touch of the divine who develops food reserves to keep the Egyptian empire running while there’s famine in the land. So he goes from a former slave to an ex-con to the second in command of what we’re led to believe is the world’s biggest empire.

Let’s get to the important parts. Jacob/Israel sends his kids to Egypt to buy food. Turns out, these brothers come bearing silver as payment for their food. So they set up a time to give payment to the Egyptian vizier for the food and he’s Joseph, although they don’t know it. After all these years, here he stands before his former oppressors. He stands over them like they stood over him, holding each other’s lives in their hands. Joseph has spent his adult life running from one bittersweet situation to the next. He’s a mover and shaker in Potiphar’s house but he’s also got Mrs. Robinson on his case. He’s a mover and a shaker in the Egyptian government and now, draped in all this power, his brothers, his former oppressors have been delivered right into his hands. Still, he doesn’t know all of the facts. Is Jacob alive? Is Benjamin alive? Should he get revenge? Should he forgive them? What good would any actions do? Emotionally distressed, he goes to a back room and weeps in private. Then he decides to meet with his brothers a bit more.

Joseph meets his brothers and secretly gives them back the silver they paid for food. He does this, you should know, while he’s getting drunk with them. Everyone’s confused and emotionally stressed out, so why not get sauced. I imagine that, for Joseph’s brothers, the entire scene is like that scene in *The Godfather* when Don Corleone’s daughter is getting married and some of the people there are asking for favors. They are both happy and terrified at the same time.

In the midst of this Dionysian revelry, Joseph decides to trick them. Who knows why? Was he pissed and trying to legitimate his desire for revenge? Was he thinking of always maintaining the upper hand, always having leverage over his brothers? Was he just being sneaky because his family heritage is littered with liars and thieves? I kind of think he was trying to keep the upper hand. Think about it: Joseph was always a minority in the Egyptian empire. He always had to be one step ahead of everyone. Sure, he had God on his side but when was God ever as predictable as political machinations. In his translation of Torah called The Five Books of Moses Robert Alter speaks about a thread running through the Old Testament that shows both divine action and human cleverness are at work in the movements of the narrative. God is certainly at work but is also at work in the development of clever, politically savvy actions taken by the very human characters. So there’s a sense in which Joseph’s political acuity is not only his survival tactics at work but the work of God in his life. Anyway, as his brothers are about to leave the party, Joseph has his personal cup planted in his brothers’ bags and then has his men pursue them. When Joseph’s men catch up with this band of brothers they stop them and accuse them of theft, saying “Why have you paid back evil for good?” Then, because Joseph’s wheels within wheels weren’t enough drama, it is declared that the brother that has Joseph’s special silver cup is Benjamin and he now has to become Joseph’s slave. The lectionary left this out!

When the other brothers realize this they tear their clothes and are horrified by the prospect. They all come to Joseph and plead with him, but he says that he must have Benjamin. Big brother Judah says that Benjamin is the only child left of his mother, as his brother Joseph is dead, and that Benjamin is the father's favorite. Judah is using the same reasoning that was used to dispose of Joseph as a reason to keep Benjamin with Jacob. And he's saying this to Joseph's face! Judah begs Joseph to take him as a slave instead of Benjamin, willing to take the place of his father's favorite in order to keep his father happy in his old age. Such is the change that has come over Judah since Joseph's disappearance.

Still, Joseph has them where he wants them. If he wants his revenge, he's created the perfect means to exact it. But all the familial manipulation goes on to serve the drama of the text. Joseph is the child of dreams before whom all of his brothers bowed their heads. How else to fulfill that bit of narrative than through a demonstration of his power by making Benjamin his potential slave?! The one taken in slavery is now the one with the power to make others his slaves. Joseph could so easily do this and destroy his family the way they destroyed him. The narrative seems to be pointing towards this result—but he changes his mind. Rather than return evil for evil, he returns evil with good. Rather than destroying his family, Joseph embraces them. He cancels their debt and saves them from starvation. Rather than Joseph's revelation of his identity leading to the destruction of his family, it does the opposite. Joseph's revelation of his identity is the means by which his family is healed. It's more than reconciliation, it's a restoration.

It is a change of heart, rather a change of many hearts that is worthy of admiration and praise. However, let us not forget that this reunion happens while the empire still stands. And Joseph's descendants will be the slaves that are not saved until the Exodus. There is a sense that they are experiencing something wonderful in a small pocket of freedom that will one day become a prison. True to the story of Joseph and his brothers, all of the big moments are bittersweet. We miss what makes them bittersweet if we only keep to the big events and don't look to what happens in between them.

There is an obvious reference to what happened in Ferguson this past week here. While the tragic shooting of 18-year-old Michael Brown was the start of a week of protest and sporadic violence, this big event was not possible without years of neglect, hardship, oppression, and increased militarization. If we only keep to the big events and don't look to what happens in between them, we miss the ways in which situations of both slavery and salvation, both oppression and reconciliation begin to take shape. We must learn to pay more attention.

When we turn to our Gospel reading, we see another case of the protagonist changing his mind. Certainly, our passage begins with classic Jesus: saying stuff and pissing off the Pharisees. But then we get the story of the Canaanite woman. What is interesting to note here is that, in the Gospel of Mark, the woman is called a Syro-Phoenician. To call her a Canaanite is horribly anachronistic, like referring to some concoction in the college dining commons as "oriental salad" or calling a Norwegian a Viking.¹

Still, let's recap the story: Jesus and the disciples are hanging out and the Canaanite woman comes up to him shouting for Jesus to expel a demon from her daughter. The disciples, in typical

¹ Brian McLaren. *Everything Must Change*.

disciple fashion, tell her to go away and stop bothering them. However, their dismissal is tinged with racial overtones. Some commentators have said that Jesus and the disciples are aware of her ethnicity from the start and that is why they don't want to talk to her. Moreover, Jesus' own response makes it abundantly clear who matters and who doesn't. *I came only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel* he says, making it known that he is there for the Jews and not for some "Canaanite." It is as if he is saying "Look, I don't know if you know exactly who I am but I'm kind of a big deal, okay. And I don't have time to be spending it on you and your so-called demon baby. So there's nothing to see here, just move along." It's one of those rare moments where Jesus comes across as kind of a jerk—or, if I've offended your tender sensibilities, Jesus comes across as more "human."

What's remarkable about this story is that the woman doesn't let up. She doesn't take the dismissal as an acceptable action for the so-called Son of God. She kneels right in front of him and says "Help me." His response, still kind of jerkish, is the racially tinged: *It is not fair to throw children's food before dogs*. To call someone a dog was to use the general racist term for a Gentile pagan. So Jesus' words here are laced with some very nasty racial and ethnic sentiments even if he does not directly call her a dog. However, she responds by saying that *even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table*. Even those who are outside of the chosen people, even those who stand outside of the house of Israel, eat these heavenly morsels and do so without it being intentionally given to them. Whether Jesus is there for her or not, the Canaanite woman testifies to the power of the Gospel beyond its supposed intended audience. And Jesus sees this, and, like Joseph, he changes his mind. Jesus realizes he is more than just a light for the Jews. The God Who is man is himself converted by a woman who will not let him get away with being a racist jerk. It is the Canaanite woman who reminds Jesus that God is not too big for any person, any race, or any ethnic group.

When we think about Jesus in this passage, it is easy to resort to thoughts that don't require us to change our minds about him. Surely, Jesus the Son of God, perfect in every way, is simply testing the woman. There's just no way that Jesus could demonstrate ethnic preference, racial insensitivity, or Semite privilege. I mean, he's human but he's not *that* human—unless he is that human, and thanks be to God for that. Any testing, or irony in the passage is something that we put into it. Even the Messiah needs to be reminded of his identity; the revelation of that identity—of who Jesus truly is and what he is truly sent to earth for—is revealed to him through a marginalized person he initially thought was no better than a dog.

When we think about events such as what happened and continues to happen in Ferguson, MO, it is easy to resort to thoughts that don't require us to change. "Well, if they didn't want the police to attack them with rubber bullets and smoke bombs and tear gas and undocumented arrests and military surplus vehicles, those protesters shouldn't have rioted." "Well, all violence is bad so we can't really pick a side. I just hope everyone is safe and seeks peace." In cases of injustice, neutrality is more or less the equivalent of complicity with the powers that be. Yet our Gospel reading shows us a picture of Jesus where his actions are in need of a change. Jesus is a person in a place of privilege and through his interactions with the Canaanite woman he has his privilege checked. As pastor and theologian Greg Boyd (the guy from Minnesota, not the guy from Greenville whose name rhymes with Greg) says: "The only way we can expand our horizon—and the only way we can begin to bridge the racial divide between whites and blacks in our

country and in the church—is for white people to humbly acknowledge that our experience is a myopic, privileged experience and to listen and learn from the experiences of people who in many respects continue to live in quite a different world from our own.”

Jesus changes his mind. Joseph changes his mind. Jesus revokes his privileged position when it is thrown back at him and Joseph reveals himself for the sake of restoration and healing, not revenge. These are the examples we have been given this week—examples of “great men” discarding their privilege and embracing those who have been cast aside and forgotten, even and especially if they have reason not to like them. In between the lines of the Gospel, in between the passages regarding Joseph, in between our recognition of our privilege, our favoritism and its revocation, that’s where the messy, difficult stuff of reconciliation happens. And we miss it if we’re only focused on the big events.