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August 20, 2017

"God's Table"

Genesis 45:1-15 Matthew 15:22-31 Romans 11:1-2a-29-32

INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS 45

Joseph was a dreamer. Unfortunately he didn't keep his dreams to himself. When he shared with his brothers a dream about them bowing down to him they sold him into slavery and told his father he was dead. After years of imprisonment for something he didn't do Joseph wound up interpreting dreams for the Pharaoh. That led to Joseph becoming the second in command of the whole of Egypt and in the perfect place to not only save Egypt from a coming drought but to be able to save his own brothers and father and nation from that same drought. In this morning's reading from Genesis Joseph confronts his brothers and reveals who he really is to them. Hear the word of the Lord from Genesis 45.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 15:21-28

The setting for this morning's gospel lesson is about Jesus needing a vacation. Ever since Jesus heard that John the Baptist had been beheaded Jesus has been trying to get away for some quiet time to regroup and recuperate from the drain of the crowds. For the first time in his ministry Jesus decides to go beyond the borders of Palestine. Since he couldn't find this privacy in Jewish territory, maybe he could find some in Gentile territory. Maybe at least the Jewish leaders who were opposing him would not dare follow. But as we will see, not even there can Jesus escape the pressing needs of others. Hear the gospel of our Lord from Matthew 15:21-28.

Let us pray. Lord, thank you for the example of this woman's faith. May we so grow in our faith. May we find the courage to approach, to ask, to believe and to not give up until we see the fruit of our faith come to be. Open our minds, our hearts, and our souls to receive your word this morning. This we ask in Jesus' name.

Yesterday at our Men's Breakfast our special guest was Randal O'Brian, the Superintendent of GCCISD. I had the privilege of introducing him, and I made him share a story he had shared at a Lee College Basketball game of the time that he had to guard Karl Malone, the NBA All Star who played for the Utah Jazz for almost his entire career. It turns out that when Randal was playing Power Forward for the East Texas Baptist College in Marshall Texas, they were slated for a warm up game against Louisiana Tech. Randal shared that when they arrived at the stadium he saw a Black Pontiac Trans Am parked in the lot that had the license plate, Mailman. Karl Malone somehow was able to drive a Trans Am when he was only an amateur college student, and was able to afford his own vanity plate. Karl Malone's nick name was the Mailman because he always delivered.

Karl went on to NBA fame and fortune. But fortunately for us, Randal left a life of pipe welding to become the Superintendent of GCCISD, which this year was rated 10th among all the other 50 independent School districts in the Greater Houston Area. Are you amazed as I was to learn that we live in a part of the world where we have 50 Independent School Districts? In my thank you note to Randal I described him as the Mailman 2.0 for us because for GCCISD he has ... delivered.

The gospel lesson this morning is about a woman who wanted her daughter to **BE** delivered. She wanted her daughter to be delivered from a demon. Even though she was not Jewish, even though she was from what we now call Lebanon and a race of people who had been at war with Israel she did not let that stop her. She came shouting, Have Mercy on me lord, Son of David!"

The FIRST thing we can say about this woman is that she was [REDACTED]. This woman was well aware of this great gulf between her people and Israel. Undoubtedly she had heard of the great powers of Jesus and she was willing to cross racial lines, put down her pride and cry out for help.

The SECOND thing we can say about this woman is that [REDACTED]. There were at least [REDACTED] intimidating factors that could have made her give up.

[REDACTED] there was [REDACTED]. The scriptures tell us that to her cry of help Jesus replied not a word. There is no reaction harder to bear than silence. A flat "No" at least acknowledges your presence and tells you where you stand. But when there is silence you don't know what the person is thinking or even if they have acknowledged you. Surprisingly, this did not intimidate her. She perceived what very few people have the faith to perceive--that [REDACTED].

[REDACTED], she was not intimidated by [REDACTED] of Jesus' disciples. They regarded her pleas for help as merely a nuisance. They were on vacation. The disciples, sadly like some in our country and even in some churches today, became fatigued under the constant pressure of the demands made upon them.. Part of this woman's faith, however, was that she would not be put off by the silence or even direct opposition of others.

When Jesus finally did break his silence he said to her, [REDACTED]. Surprisingly, not even that put her off. In spite of what Jesus said she fell at his feet and cried out, "Sir, help me."

In response to this woman's persistent plea for help Jesus makes another statement that we have difficulty in understanding. He said to her: It is not right to take children's bread and throw it to the dogs." However, the actual word that Jesus used was not dog but puppy. He was referring not to the kind of wild dogs

that roamed the streets at that time. He was referring to a household pet, a baby one at that. "It's not right to take children's bread and give it to "da widuwl puppies." ☺

Like a puppy who never gives up she came back with "It is true sir. I admit it. I am a widdle puppy. I realize that I have no claim upon you but Sir, even the puppy dogs get the scraps from the master's table." She was saying in effect: Sir, I admit that I have no claim upon you, but there must be some extra grace that you have that I would be deserving of. Crumbs would be enough.

Jesus was [REDACTED] by her answer. Jesus said to her something he never said to his own disciples. He said, "Woman, great is your faith! On no occasion that we know of that Jesus ever said of Peter, James, and John, "Great is your faith." More often the words he spoke to them were, "O ye of [REDACTED] faith." In fact, on only one other occasion did Jesus praise a person for great faith, and that was another border crosser, a Gentile, a Roman soldier stationed in Capernaum who said that he believed that Jesus could just say the word and his servant would be healed.

We can learn a lot from this woman. We need to be about crossing barriers, erasing divisions, blazing trails, not being discouraged by silence or even opposition. We need to be willing to try something different, to get something new started, even IF we are on vacation or AFTER vacation to get something started again.

To succeed we will need to be [REDACTED] like this mother who came to Jesus for the sake of her daughter. We need to come to Jesus for the sake of our daughters, our sons and their generations and our grandchildren's generations that need to know the joy of knowing Jesus. I believe that they can come to know him through what we do here. However, continuing to do [REDACTED] what we've been always done will continue to get what we've always got ...and maybe even less. You may have heard that Einstein once said that his definition of Insanity is "to continue to do what you've always done and expect different results."

Wes Seliger is an unconventional Episcopal clergyman who loves motorcycles. He tells about being in a motorcycle shop one day, drooling over a huge Honda 750 and wishing that he could buy it. A salesman came over and began to talk about his product. He talked about speed, acceleration, excitement, the attention-getting growl of the pipes, racing, risk. He talked about how the good-looking girls would be attracted to anyone riding on such a cycle.

Then he discovered that Wes was a minister. Busted. Immediately the salesman changed his language and even the tone of his voice. He spoke quietly and talked about good mileage and visibility. It was indeed a "practical" vehicle.

Wes observed: "Lawn mower salespersons are not surprised to find pastors

looking at their merchandise; motorcycle salespersons are. Why? Does this tell us something about pastors and about the church? Lawn mowers are slow, safe, sane, practical, and middle-class. Motorcycles are fast, dangerous, wild, thrilling." Then Wes asks a question: "Is being a Christian more like mowing a lawn or like riding a motorcycle? Is the Christian life safe and sound or dangerous and exciting?" He concludes, "The common image of the church is pure lawn mower slow, deliberate, plodding. Our task is to take the church out on the open road, give it the gas, and see what the old baby will do!" 1

To grow beyond where we are now will require us to blaze some new trails, to pioneer some additional avenues of ministry to break through barriers, to be persistent, and to not give up in the face of silence, or in the face of outright rejection, or even in the face of challenges to see if we're really serious about seeking answers to our questions and our quests.

Most Saturday afternoons I make time to listen to the Moth Radio Hour on KUHF. Yesterday, one of the stories that really struck me was the story of Lisa Jackson. Like the Lebanese woman who came to Jesus, Lisa had a mother who advocated for her. Lisa was the first of her family to go to college. She was good at math and science so her mother challenged her to study to become a doctor.

When Lisa was in High School she went to a summer program at Tulane because they were giving away a free HP programmable calculator. That summer was when the Love Canal crisis in Buffalo, New York happened. The Canal had been started by Alfred Love, but he couldn't finish it and so it was filled in with chemical waste and covered over. Eventually the pressure caused the waste to begin to seep into people's basements. That summer Lisa figured that if chemical engineers can make the waste that leaked, a chemical engineer would be the one to fix it. So she decided she wanted to study to be NOT a doctor, but an engineer.

When she told her mother she wanted to be an engineer her grandmother asked, "Why do you want to work on a train?"

Lisa was the valedictorian of her High School in New Orleans and she went on to finish her undergraduate degree at Tulane. From there she went to Princeton for graduate school. After graduation she began working for the Environmental Protection Agency in New Jersey.

Lisa went home on Aug 27, 2005 for her mom's birthday just in time for Hurricane Katrina. She managed to get her immediate family out but not so for some of her relatives and friends. She said that the hurricane caused more devastation than it should have because of the neglected levees that weren't able to hold and the absence of wetlands that were cut for oil and gas lines that had unintended consequences. Finally her mother understood that for her daughter, being an engineer was better than being a doctor. In 2008, Lisa Jackson became the first

African American to serve as the head of Environmental Protection Agency for the Obama Administration, a post that she held until 2013.

Shortly after her appointment Lisa took her mom to the nation's capital. The President wanted to meet her mom. So Lisa took her mom and her mother's grandkids to meet him in the Oval Office. A woman who grew up in segregation got to meet the first African American president of the United States.

After that meeting Lisa took her mom to her building four blocks away to show off her office. Her office was in the building that used to be the building of the Postmaster General of the United States.

Lisa reflected "Sometimes you have an opportunity to think of all the things that influenced you and worked together to make you who you are. Lisa said she did not think it was an accident that her office was in the building of the Postmaster General because when her father returned from serving in the Navy in World War II the only jobs available to black men were that of Pullman Porter or Mailman. Lisa's father chose Mailman. 2

Randal O'Brian was a 20 year old welder who left it to play basketball for East Texas Baptist College. He didn't win in his matchup against Karl 'The Mailman' Malone, but Randal is delivering in his dedication to public service to our children and our community through our public schools.

Lisa's father's example delivered so much more than mail. His dedication to public service in the only one of two jobs available to him after having served his country motivated his daughter to become an engineer, not just any engineer, the Director of the Environmental Protection Agency. She chose to dedicate her life to public service in making air and water and ground cleaner for all.

Lisa surprised her mother. She was initially surprised by her daughter's desire to not be a doctor. But when she understood her daughter's calling she would not let her do anything else.

Joseph surprised his brothers. They sold him into slavery but he broke through racial and religious barriers to not only save an African nation from years of drought, but to save his own family and nation so that there could come from his line a Jesus, the savior of the world.

I want to surprise Jesus. My prayer and hope is that we will surprise Jesus and cause him to marvel at us and give us the same kudo that he gave that woman from Lebanon, "Great is your faith, FAITH." I want to work to grow God's family beyond the human limitations that some want to impose. I want to open the man made borders, the lines that exist only on maps. I want to build bridges. I want to "take the church out on the open road, give it the gas and see what the old baby will do!"

I want to work to see people of all colors and creeds, even if it's no creed to come together to work for peace and strive for love and not hate. I don't want to give up in the face of silence or even vocal opposition, or even challenging questions. I may start out asking for table scraps, but I believe I can be pleasantly surprised to find I not only have a place at the table... but by dedicating my life to public service like Randal and Lisa and Wes I can be erasing barriers and making room for many more places at ...God's Table.

Let's pray. Thank you, Jesus. We thank you for this precious example of faith in this woman who cared more for her daughter's healing than she did about the barriers that could have kept her away. We pray that we will not put up barriers between us and those you call us to touch through us.

Grow our faith to believe what we can't see yet. Grow our lives to make room for new things and new friends. Grow our hope to know that you love us and are in this ministry with us and will take us where you want us to go.

We pray for those who need to know...for those who need to know they are loved...who need to know they have hope...who need to know they have hope in you. ...who need to know you. May we be channels through which their need to know can be met.

We pray for those who need your healing presence.,

1 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by King Duncan
2. Lisa Jackson The Moth Radio Hour "Environmental Engineering" August 19, 2017

The Belhar Confession is a Christian statement of belief written in Afrikaans in 1982. It was adopted as a confession of faith by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church in South Africa in 1986. The Evangelical Reformed Church in Africa in Namibia adopted the Belhar Confession in 1997 and doing became the first non-South African Church to do so. It was also adopted by the United Protestant Church in Belgium, The Reformed Church in America and most recently in 2014 the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). when it was added to its Book of Confessions.

According to the Belhar Confession, unity is both a gift and an obligation for the church. This unity originally referred to non-segregation between Christians of different races, but after the formation of the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa in 1994, the word "unity" came to refer to administrative unity within the managerial structures of the denomination.

Another key theme of the Belhar Confession is the dichotomy of reconciliation and the justice of God. According to the confession, God is the God of the destitute, the poor, and the wronged, and for this reason the church should stand by people in any form of suffering. It claims that individual, racial and social

segregation is sin, and that all forms of segregation always lead to enmity and hatred.

Here is a portion of the Confession:

"We affirm and believe that that this unity of the people of God must be manifested and be active in a variety of ways: in that we love one another; that we experience, practice and pursue community with one another; that we are obligated to give ourselves willingly and joyfully to be of benefit and blessing to one another; that we share one faith, have one calling, are of one soul and one mind; have one God and Father, are filled with one Spirit, are baptized with one baptism, eat of one bread and drink of one cup, confess one name, are obedient to one Lord, work for one cause, and share one hope; together come to know the height and the breadth and the depth of the love of Christ; together are built up to the stature of Christ, to the new humanity; together know and bear one another's burdens, thereby fulfilling the law of Christ that we need one another and up build one another, admonishing and comforting one another; that we suffer with one another for the sake of righteousness; pray together; together serve God in this world; and together fight against all which may threaten or hinder this unity."