

HEAR WHAT THE SPIRIT IS SAYING

In Scripture and Prayer and The Great Cloud of Witnesses

Week of August 20, 2023

Collect for Proper 15

Almighty God, you have given your only Son to be for us a sacrifice for sin, and also an example of godly life: Give us grace to receive thankfully the fruits of his redeeming work, and to follow daily in the blessed steps of his most holy life; through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen.** BCP 232

Genesis 45:1-15 NRSVue, 2021

Our Hebrew scripture lesson relates a decisive moment in the story of Joseph as he reveals himself to his brothers, who then journey home to tell their father Jacob that his son is still alive. The brothers are at first overwhelmed by the discovery that the brother they had sold into slavery is now Pharaoh's right-hand man. Joseph tells them not to be upset: this had all been part of God's plan to preserve Israel during the coming time of famine.

¹ 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; he 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.

Exploring Genesis 45:1-15

By Liz Goodman, pastor of Church on the Hill in Lenox, Massachusetts, and Monterey United Church of Christ in Monterey, Massachusetts.

To preach on a portion of the story of Joseph is to do it a disservice.

First of all, it's not a safe assumption that people will know the larger context. Moreover, this finale only arrives with due power if you've followed every twist, trick, and turn, riding

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the mounting drama while imagining what it must have felt like to be any one of these pressed-upon characters—envious, frightened, heartbroken, menaced, tempted at the pinnacle of power but choosing instead to act in grace.

You also might miss the strange absence of God at work. God, though spoken of a fair amount and assumed as real and faithful throughout the story, is never mentioned as a character in the story. God never addresses any of the characters. God never is seen to act except in retrospect. Joseph recognizes that God has been at work, but the story doesn't narrate that in real time.

This, it seems to me, makes it an important story for people these days to know. Many of the people who sit in the pews where we preach might assume real faith means feeling God as vocal and active every moment of every day—a thing they don't feel, thus making them anxious their faith isn't what it ought to be. God is there to advise you about the littlest things, if only you only have faith to listen. God is there to direct you about the biggest things, if only you have the faith to obey. Many people seem to believe that “God has a plan” for them and that their central task in life is to figure out that plan ahead of time.

But that's not how I experience God at work in my life, and I suspect that's the same for lots of people, though they might be ashamed to admit it.

Matt Skinner has a new book out on Acts, subtitled *Catching Up with the Spirit*. In it he makes a helpful remark regarding what he thinks is often an assumption at play, “that God's ‘activity’ in the world is like a puppeteer pulling strings.” It's different for him, it seems. “It's easier for me,” he notes, “to look back on situations, after the fact, and wonder. With the help of hindsight, I might perceive ways in which I was open or closed to God's presence.”

This is the power of Joseph's final confession: that though none of what has happened to him over the course of his life is what he'd have chosen it to be, he can yet now see that God has set him up to preserve life.

Joseph has every reason in the world to act mercilessly toward his brothers, as mercilessly as they behaved toward him. How does he muster such resolve not to? I suspect such amazing grace can only come from the faithful conviction that he suddenly comes to: “God sent me before you to preserve live. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant.”

Preaching this story whole cloth invites the congregation to reflect on their own lives, to wonder where God has opened a way that turned out to be the true way, where God might have used a narrowing of options in life to set up a chance for grace.

Time is one of the hardest qualities to capture when we consider scripture. All the stories of the Bible take time, more time than we moderns might realize. In fact, I think one of the greatest errors people of faith commit in considering how God works in the world is to bring our immense impatience to the question. We expect God to work on our schedule. We even demand that God work within our framework of what constitutes a long time, which is actually not very long. But God is slow, patient—so time can be a gift.

It might benefit those for whom we preach to demonstrate this in some real, felt way. That might mean letting this whole story in to take over much of the service of worship, reassuring the people once worship is complete that, though God might be slow, he is faithful to his purpose.

“Joseph’s whole story” in *The Christian Century*, February 18, 2022. [Accessed online](#), August 14, 2023.

Psalm 133 NRSVue, 2021

The psalm celebrates the blessing of a harmonious people.

- 1 How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!
- 2 It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.
- 3 It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life forevermore.

Exploring Psalm 133

By Cláudio Carvalhaes, Assistant Professor of Worship and Preaching, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky

This small psalm is a Song of Ascents, which means a song to go up to high places (like the Temple Mount in Jerusalem). In this prayer, the psalmist is eager to look for unity. As he ascends, he is looking down to Israel, hoping that his people will live in harmony and unity. They were kindred, and they should live together in unity. In order to accomplish that, he draws on imagery, places and names that were common to all and that could foster connectivity and a strong sense of togetherness.

First, we have the image of oil overflowing. The oil is poured out on the head of Aaron. Oil was used for cleansing, anointing, and healing. In many ways the use of oil was fundamental to the daily life of people. Through its healing properties it was also a symbol of hope, bringing forth possibilities of new life. Oil was also used to anoint a king or priest, to indicate his special role in service to God and Israel. Aaron had his head anointed with oil by Moses ([Lev. 8:12](#)). The generosity of the oil poured out on Aaron’s head and beard and collar is also a metaphor of God’s generosity and the generosity of unity, of living together. Anointing with oil created spaces for people to live together.

The second metaphor is water, the “dew of Hermon.” The snow and water from Mount Hermon goes down to the Jordan Valley and flows to all of the far places. On its way, it waters dry land. Through the generosity and life-giving power of the waters of Mount Hermon the psalmist issues a call to the people to worship God and to live together. The water is what makes everybody’s life possible. Later on, Christians will use the waters of baptism to call each other on issues of unity and togetherness.

Thus, in this text the two metaphors, oil and water, both provide for life and for common belonging. Both oil and water are used by the psalmist to issue a call for a social practice: worship of God that results in the unity of God's people. This call entails a movement of the body toward God. People were called to ascend, to move, to make a conscious act, to walk and sing to God. They had common elements in their history, namely, the promise of God's blessing and healing in the oil poured throughout Aaron's beard and body; and common elements in their environment, namely, the dew of Mount Hermon to provide sustenance. These elements were good enough reasons for people to trust in God's provision that they could live together in unity.

Thus, unity in this psalm is related to 1) a liturgical movement: going to the top of the mountain by way of singing; (2) the worship of God; (3) their own history of God's healing and honoring people through oil; (4) paying attention to environmental resources, such as water, as common resources and not private possessions. At this place, filled with oil and dew, God lives and ordains God's blessings. At this place, when unity perseveres and wins, life happens for everybody. Where unity fails, life perishes and God's blessings cease as well.

Like the psalmist we should look for the highest place and see how our brothers and sisters are divided. Our task today is to ask: Who are my kindred? What kind of unity can we foster? My kindred are not only those who are related to me by blood. Under God's love, we all become kindred people. Like the psalmist we must call our people to live together in the *oikos*, the household of God. How can we provide for each other? What are the elements in our history that we can tell each other about God's provision to us all? How are we to provide God's healing for people? How are we to honor each other with the oil of God's love?

We are to call those who are different from us—from other cultures, from other religious understanding and faith practices—to live together. That call surpasses people's country of origin, color of skin, and beliefs. Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, and others: all are to live under this call as kindred people. As Martin Luther King Jr. said: "It is no longer a choice, my friends, between violence and nonviolence. It is either nonviolence or nonexistence." [1] Instead of violence and hatred, let us seek God's gifts of anointing oil and life-giving water, common elements that sustain us all.

[1] Martin Luther King Jr., "Remaining Awake through a Great Revolution," Commencement Address at Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio, June 1965.

Excerpt of "Theological Perspective (Psalm 133)," in *Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Additional Essays, vol. 9, Feasting on the Word* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32 NRSVue, 2021

In this reading Paul sets forth his belief that God plans to bring Jews as well as Gentiles to salvation. This apostle to the Gentiles continues to wrestle with a difficult question: why is it that so many of Jesus' own people have not accepted him as the Christ? God has not rejected the Jewish people who were foreknown, yet now Jews and Gentiles are equal in that all have been disobedient to God. In the next step the Jewish people will see the mercy shown to the Gentiles and want themselves to share in it in their own way.

- 1 I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin.
- 2 God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. [Do you not know what the scripture says of Elijah, how he pleads with God against Israel?]
- 29 The gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.

- 30 Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience,
- 31 so also they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they also may now receive mercy.
- 32 For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Exploring Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

By Martha C. Highsmith, Deputy Secretary of the University and Lecturer in Divinity, Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut

One of the treasured tenets of American life is the conviction that, if you work hard, you will be rewarded; effort will pay off. Similarly, those who are lazy and ineffective will find themselves at the bottom of the heap or out the door. Either way, people get what they deserve, and they deserve what they get.

Some modern-day preachers convert this view into their own good news and insist that God wants us to be well-to-do. All we have to do is believe, attend church on Sunday, and pony up when the plate is passed. Then, so this version of the good news goes, God will be pleased with us and will reward us with our own riches. Unfortunately for the preachers of the prosperity gospel, there is little, if anything, in Christian Scripture to support this view. The gospel truth is much more complex.

Our relationship with God is not transactional, based on our being rewarded for our goodness. In the scandal of grace, we receive God's good gifts in spite of ourselves. Even disobedience to God's way becomes an avenue of mercy. We never get what we really deserve; we would perish if we did. We can never deserve what we do get, because God seems to love us, no matter what.

God has a long history of this irrational love. From "in the beginning," humans have been determined to go their own way, rather than following God's way. The biblical record is full of accounts of God's willful children and God's never-ending mercy, what the Hebrew Scripture calls *hesed*, often translated as "steadfast love." The Greek word for mercy, *eleos*, gives us our word "*eleemosynary*," or charity. This is where it gets hard for a lot of Christians, those who work hard to be independent and self-sufficient. Many of us, part of the "pray, pay, and obey" generation that has dominated many mainline denominations, are more used to giving charity than receiving it. It is very difficult for us to feel indebted to anyone.

That God's mercy is integral to God's sovereignty, not linked to our good or bad behavior, is hard to accept. Paul struggles to understand how Israel, God's own chosen people, can remain in the circle of God's love after rejecting God's Messiah. He concludes that the people's rejection of God does not lead to God's rejection of the people. We may violate our own integrity, but God's integrity, God's steadfast love, remains constant. Even more counterintuitive is the notion that God works through, and perhaps even creates, our disobedience.

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The Hebrew Scripture from the semicontinuous track for this Sunday of the lectionary tells the story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph eventually explains to his brothers their own actions: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today” ([Gen. 50:20](#)). Joseph, and Paul after him, have a clear sense of God’s freedom to redeem any human sinfulness, and an understanding that God takes the long view, always working in human history toward the fulfillment of God’s will and way.

Some modern-day groups have taken as their cause the conversion of the Jews to Christianity, which seems a distortion of Paul’s concern for his people. This concern applies as much to us as it does to the ancient Jews, because we too have been disobedient. We too have not fully embraced God’s new way of life in Christ. We too have received mercy. God’s wide horizon puts our present failures to be God’s people in context: If the people God created and chose for God’s own can disobey and still be part of God’s plan, then so can we.

In a sweeping declaration, Paul proclaims that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (v. 29)—once given, forever ours. Nothing we do can convince God to let go of us (cf. [Rom. 8:38–39](#)). We are the beneficiaries of an eternal love—but so is everyone else God claims. We get no special treatment; rather, God extends the special treatment to all God’s children. Many will welcome this inclusivity and take comfort in what may seem an unending string of second chances. Others, who work hard in the church and hope for a heavenly reward, may find this difficult, even offensive. What is the point of living obedient lives if the disobedient are pardoned without condition?

We are all among the disobedient, however, even the best of us. To be “imprisoned ... in disobedience” (v. 32) is to claim the freedom to act as we will. God grants us that freedom so that we may choose to love as freely and gracefully as God does, but too often we convert our freedom into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called cheap grace, “the grace we bestow upon ourselves.”[1]

Costly grace, by contrast, “confronts us with a gracious call to follow Jesus, it comes as a word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart.”[2] We cannot bless ourselves with God’s grace, nor can we withhold blessing from others. God’s gifts are freely given—by God who acts in sovereign love—not something we can give to, or even claim for, ourselves. Grace is God’s alone to offer, and God offers it, it seems, to all people—the Jew and the Gentile, the ins and the outs, the faithful and the disobedient.

There is no one beyond the reach of grace. God’s call is also inescapable. Those who have received the gift of grace are also to accept the call of the Giver. Grace, then, is a call to discipleship. God no more rescinds the call than God revokes the grace.

These twin constants, gift and call, are signs of God’s unbounded faithfulness, which is unaffected by anything we do and, at the same time, never ceases to call us back to our own faithfulness. The gift, the grace, is irrevocable, and so is the call.

[1] Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 47.

[2] *Ibid.*, 48.

“Pastoral Perspective on Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32,” in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary: Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011).

Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28 NRSVue, 2021

In our gospel Jesus teaches that the thoughts and intentions of the human heart are paramount. Jesus warns against such blind guides preoccupied with externals. He then travels beyond the boundaries of Israel to the territory of Tyre and Sidon and encounters a Canaanite woman who beseeches him to heal her daughter. The first Christians were unsure whether they were to offer the faith to non-Jews, and the give-and-take in this story may reflect that uncertainty. Jesus sees his own mission as confined to Israel, but the woman's faith causes him to give her the bread she asks for. Symbolically it is the saving food of the gospel which heals her daughter.

- 10 Then he 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. 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, sexual immorality, 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 he 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 from that moment.

Exploring Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28

By Dock Hollingsworth, Assistant Dean and Assistant Professor of Supervised Ministry, McAfee School of Theology, Mercer University, Atlanta, Georgia

Long lists of instructions about what and when things could be touched or eaten dominate much of the first-century Jewish religious teaching. These dietary laws placed a high premium on the purity of the individual, and in today’s passage, Jesus is turning expectations on their head. While most of the religious community was preoccupied with what would defile and hurt the body, Jesus was more concerned with what comes out of our bodies that can defile and hurt the world.

Yesterday's lunch is gone forever. Jesus asks, "Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?" (v. 17). It is a crude image. The sewer has carried away any mistakes we may have made by putting into our body things that the dietary laws call unclean. However, the careless words, the evil, the lies, and the fornication continue to be harmful. Our words and actions have the power to defile and hurt, and the pain of those choices is not washed down the sewer like yesterday's lunch.

If the dietary laws of ancient Israel seem distant, the principles on which they were based are still active in our culture today. Many in our culture were raised with a similar ethic. We were taught that good children kept their bodies clean of those things that could defile. While this is still true, Matthew's text may help listeners shift from a purely individualist theology to a broader Christian citizenship. Jesus calls us from a self-centered consideration of what might harm our bodies to a broader concern of how our actions and attitudes hurt others.

Matthew connects this discussion of defilement with Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman, a difficult passage for preaching, raising questions that are difficult to answer in a single homily. This passage has a demon, Jesus ignoring the cries of a desperate mother, annoyed disciples, a restrictive mission of Jesus, and the apparent insult of Jesus calling this woman a dog—too much to raise and satisfy in one sermon or even a few sermons. Nevertheless, preaching the difficult texts reminds us all that life is messy and that not every issue of significance is neatly tied up in three points. Preacher and listener have a chance to struggle together.

Jesus is in the Gentile region of Tyre and Sidon, where prudent Israelites do not walk alone. Racial stereotypes and bigotry inform all encounters between Israelites and Canaanites. The disciples walk with full attention, informed by the stories of animosity and violence. Then one of them, a resident of this alien territory, shouts at Jesus. These are not the expected shouts of bigotry that characterize the relationship of mutual disdain. Instead, this is the earnest plea of a mother.

Some roles trump all others. Yes, she is a Gentile. Yes, as a citizen of Tyre or Sidon she probably worships Herod. Yes, she is a Canaanite. However, she is also a mother with a troubled child, and in the desperate cry of a concerned parent, she petitions the one who has a reputation for healing the sick. Her appeal is a compelling one. She calls him "Lord" and appeals respectfully and cross-culturally to the "Son of David" with her petition on behalf of her daughter who is tormented by a demon.

The trouble for preaching begins here. Jesus does not answer her, and the disciples are even more offensive. They appeal for Jesus, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us" (v. 23). In terms of civility, Jesus' silence is the high moment of this pericope. He answers her petition with the explanation of a limited mission: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (v. 24). While this is a restrictive mission, it is important to note that Jesus clearly understands his mission. Matthew's Gospel highlights the time Jesus spends away in prayer. Through prayerful relationship with God, Jesus understands his mission in the world. He is not deterred from his ultimate and redemptive purpose. Saying yes to great things means saying no to good things. The limitations of time and space, for everyone who walks this planet, mean choosing to leave some things not done.

Although Jesus remains undeterred, the mother continues her appeal on behalf of her tormented daughter, "Lord, help me" (v. 25). As already noted, the silence of Jesus is his most civil response. This time, Jesus refers to her as a dog, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs" (v. 26). Referring to Canaanites as dogs was a familiar and favorite insult of the Israelites. Calling a woman a female dog had the same tone as if it were shouted today in a high-school hallway.

This language is not what the more sensitive of us expect. We expect Jesus to respond differently. Some homiletical attempts have been made to soften the response of Jesus. Some suggest that Jesus' talking with a Canaanite woman at all is a radical affirmation of her personhood. Some point to the fact that Jesus finally grants her plea, as an example of Jesus' radical inclusion of a Gentile, making an appeal for the broad reach of the gospel. The response of Jesus may have been tongue-in-cheek irony, using conventional language to make the opposite point. After all, it does follow the admonition about what comes out of our mouths.

It is possible for this text to be preached in a way that explains the behavior of Jesus in a way that we can easily grasp. However, the preacher may also stand squarely in front of the reality that Jesus does not always come through for us as we expect. Inside this story and inside our own stories, Jesus does not always conform to what we hope for. How do we respond honestly and reengage our faith when Jesus does not come through for us as we expect? Honest engagement with difficult texts validates the questions of sincere disciples.

“Homiletical Perspective on Matthew 15:(10-20), 21-28,” in *Feasting on the Word: Year A, vol. 3* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011)

LIFE OF JOSEPH



Joseph born in Haran, 11th son of Jacob



Receives many-colored coat from his father, arousing jealousy in his brothers



Recounts his dreams to his brothers, who fake his death and sell him into slavery

Sold to Potiphar, captain of the royal Egyptian guard
Finds favor, becomes overseer of Potiphar's household

Imprisoned on false accusation by Potiphar's wife

Placed in charge of other prisoners

Correctly interprets the dreams of other prisoners: chief cupbearer restored to position, chief baker hanged

Pharaoh has dreams that his wise men cannot interpret; cupbearer recalls Joseph to Pharaoh
Joseph interprets dreams. Pharaoh entrusts him with famine preparations and elevates Joseph to high authority in Egypt.

Jacob dies. He is buried in Canaan.

Joseph's remains carried from Egypt during the Exodus



Joseph dies.



7 years of plenty 7 years of famine

Assured of Joseph's forgiveness, his brothers live out their lives with him in Egypt.



Jacob sends sons to Egypt for grain; they come before Joseph but do not recognize him. Joseph holds a brother hostage while sending the others home to get Benjamin.

When Benjamin arrives in Egypt, Joseph reveals himself and forgives his brothers.