

"How Did *You* Get in Here?"
Gen. 45:1-15; Isa 56: 1; 6-8 and Matt 15:21-28
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The students will arrive in force this week.

If you are like me and don't make regular trips to campus,
the place to discern when the students are really back is Kroger.
By week's end the Kroger parking lot will be packed
And there will be groups of students in aisles
and at the registers, buying room nick knacks, snacks and beer.
Or if they are freshman, they'll be there with one or more parents in tow,
buying items for their dorm rooms
and a slightly more healthy variety of food.

The church I served in Ithaca welcomed new and returning students, faculty, staff
and parents to the three colleges there with
an ad in the "Welcome edition" of the local newspaper.
I stole it once or twice a few years back to use here in Blacksburg
It was called the "Top Ten Reasons
to Check out Blacksburg Presbyterian."

Here are the top five:

5. One God, One Faith, One Baptism for All...

no matter what you discover about yourself,
God loves you and we welcome you.

4. Good News People...We believe that No. 5 is good news!

3. "Party" Church...At God's party our spiritual hungering
is fed and our thirsting is satisfied.

2. Spiritual Guidance...It's not about commandments.
It's about relationships with others and with God.

1. We're waiting for you...

"We're waiting for you," it said
along with our full web and street address and the PC(USA) logo
and the alluring promise that we are
wheelchair and hearing device accessible.

The ad probably didn't bring us crowds of visitors,
but it raises questions that all our three scriptures raise today,
and that are playing out around us in the nation:

Are we really waiting for anyone?

Do we mean it when we say, "all are welcome here"?

Today in our nation the question matters more and more.

In the story of Joseph and his brothers
ten starving foreigners journey to the top Egyptian administrator
to buy desperately need grain.

They are outsiders come from Canaan,
unwanted immigrants showing up in a time of famine and stress,
appealing to a neighboring government for aid.
They have no idea that the powerful man in front of them
is the brother they betrayed years before,
a story that we heard together last week.
We did not read the whole ending.
At first Joseph pretends not to know them.
He speaks to them only through an interpreter
and accuses them of being spies come to
map out the weakness of Egypt for attack.
Does that sound at all familiar?
Yet here it is in our sacred text,
a dynamic of fear that is some 4000 years old.
To make his point Joseph threw his brothers in jail for three days
and then let all but one of them go with the command
that the hostage remain until they return with their youngest brother,
Benjamin, to prove that they are honest.
In front of him they speak in their own language
wondering if this woe has befallen them
because of their decades-old betrayal of a young brother.
They don't know that Joseph understands their every word.
It is an exquisitely written story that you might want
to go home today and read in full.
In the part we did hear, the brothers have returned as ordered with Benjamin
and Joseph can no longer keep up his pose.
He sends the servants out of the room
then weeps at the reunion with all his brothers.
His welcome is opulent, overwhelming, utterly genuine and
filled with forgiveness and love.
Yes, they sold him into slavery, but God
who can use any circumstance for good,
has made him a father to Pharaoh,
someone who now has the power to preserve them
and all their children.
Joseph's openness, his embrace, his elation
at being reunited with his brothers given what he knows about them
is astounding.
His generous welcome rescues his entire family from death
and is the basis for Israel's ongoing life in Egypt.

The lines in the prophet Isaiah today
are from a vision of what God intends at the end of time,
when all manner of people will assemble before God for prayer.
It's a prayer gathering, made up of
"illegal immigrants, nations at odds,

and refugees crossing strict military boundaries
on pilgrimage towards prayer.
Imagine [yourself]... having to cross into Iran or North Korea
in order to head towards a house of worship.
The...border crossings going on in this vision...
work against deep-seeded political and national identities,"ⁱ
said one scholar I read this week.

Anotherⁱⁱ put it this way:

"When God's grace breaks in, there is no limit.
Boundaries, even once necessary boundaries, explode.
Isaiah 56, he writes, "is the Old Testament equivalent
[of Paul's words:] In Christ...there is no longer Jew or Greek,
male nor female, slave nor free,
for all are one in Christ Jesus."ⁱⁱⁱ

Given the extravagant welcome of these two scriptures
What are we supposed to make of the gospel story?!!

Jesus says "watch your mouth" one moment
then mouths off himself the next,
dismissing the Canaanite woman with what we know is an ethnic slur,^{iv}
from textual studies of the time. What on earth is going on?

Some biblical scholars insist that Jesus is acting like Joseph,
striking an elaborate *pose* in his dismissal of the woman
on the heels of his recent speech
to see what his disciples will do.

Will they stand up for her on the basis
of what Jesus has taught them or not?

If that's it then we'd better ask ourselves the same question,
particularly now that there is a national debate
about identity and equality swirling around us.

Others insist Jesus is acting as any Jewish rabbi would
toward a Gentile woman.

For them it's her *persistence* that transforms Jesus
and his self-understanding.

If that's true then we might ask ourselves how well do we persist
in turning to God when we really need help.

There is not a simple answer and you are going to have to decide for
yourselves if either interpretation holds up.

The setting offers some insight.

Jesus has left a confrontation with his own religious elites
And he has headed out to the Gentile hinterlands,
the region of the Phoenician cities of Tyre and Sidon.
That's where this unnamed woman finds him.

She cries out, says Matthew, and the word for “cries”
is same word used elsewhere in Matthew’s gospel
to describe the cry of a woman in labor.
When the nameless mother first calls out to him.
“he [does] not answer her at all.”
Who hasn’t has that experience when praying to God.
She is undeterred, however.
The disciples advise him to send the noisy so-an-so away,
a hardhearted, callous response.
When Jesus does speak, he speaks only to the disciples.
The woman does not hear him say
“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”
The woman does not hear it, but we do.
The narrator makes sure we hear it.

Then, Jesus and the woman finally meet
only when she kneels in front of him.
This mother of a mentally-ill child
has stood up to being ignored,
to being given the silent treatment,
and to noisy dismissals.
But she kneels, saying “Lord, Help me.”
That’s when Jesus tells her it is not fair,
not fair to give his gifts of healing and teaching—
the children’s food—to a Gentile dog.
It is a slur and a rejection, and there is no way to soften it,
though I for one do wonder what tone of voice he used.

Over my years in ministry many people have told me
they *like* stories in which Jesus behaves like an ordinary man,
where he gets testy, as here; or tired, or goes off by himself;
where he takes naps, or throws things
as he might have did at the Temple
when the money-changers made him furious and sad.
Stories in which he teases people, or sits down for a meal
and makes it a party open to those who are not welcome at other tables.
I love that Jesus, too.

But it will not do to read this story
as a tale about a woman who meets Jesus
when he is having a bad day
and then she teaches him things he never knew.
That does not give either one of them enough credit.

So how about seeing this story as a meeting
between a determined and brave woman

willing to risk insult and rejection to help to her child,
a meeting between her and a man who knows who and what he is,
and that he must not back away from it
even for good reasons.

Tom Long suggests we picture it like this:

After years of effort a woman has founded and continues to manage
a shelter for battered women.

She has carefully defined the mission of the shelter
And she's cultivated financial support.

There are other agencies that serve children, the homeless and the hungry,
but this shelter is dedicated to the needs of abused women.

One day a man knocks at the door asking for food and money.

No matter how much the woman's heart goes out to him,
she would wonder about the priority of giving him money
that's been donated for the shelter,
even though he is in obvious need.^v

Just so "Jesus is not a generic savior...."

He is a Jew who can be the savior of all
only by being faithful to God's chosen people, Israel."^{vi}

The woman, you'll notice, does not argue with Jesus
when he says that there is something crucial
about his being a Son of David.

She calls him that herself.

She does not challenge him even when at first
he won't speak or answer her.

Instead she kneels before him, an act of worship.

Then she points out that even the crumbs
to be had from his table are of value,
crumbs don't take anything away from anyone else,
she insists that she be allowed to take part.

Jesus then acts as the Savior as she sees him to be,
then he restores her daughter.

Don't try and tidy this up or make it simple.

It's incredibly difficulty and the best thing is to live with it and think
about it and go around and round. That is the most fruitful thing
to do with really tough scripture.

All these stories say many things about identity,
but one thing they say in common is that identity matters.

You can truly welcome others
when you are fully faithful to yourself.

That's why we offer Church School
and pray for the teachers whose job it is

to teach us and themselves
how to deepen our Christian identity.

We welcome others best by knowing
who and whose we really are. And studying it.

I just have to wonder whether the Christian response
to current racial crisis here would be vastly different
if Christians fully understood that too.

Joseph, Isaiah, and Jesus, all proclaim
welcome beyond measure
to people they have reason to suspect or resist.

So it is a good day today to remember that we are honorary Jews,
who share in the stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob
Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel,
who were led out of Egypt when God heard our cry.

We were adopted into that family by the man Jesus,
who took naps when he was tired,
and who loved to eat and drink
with family, friends and neighbors.

Who welcomed to his table people who were not welcome
at other tables around town,
and when his own people rejected him
he was completely faithful to them
even in the face of their scorn.

The memory of a Canaanite woman he once met
might have helped with that a little.

Who is God bringing into our lives here?
What kind of welcome will we offer them? AMEN.

ⁱ Ingrid Lilly,

ⁱⁱ Richard W. Nysse, Professor of Old Testament at Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, writing on Isaiah 56 for workingpreacher.org.

ⁱⁱⁱ Galatians 3:29

^{iv} For Canaanite read Gentile, and an enemy gentile at that, for Israel and Canaan were enemies of long-standing.

^v Tom Long, *Matthew*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1997, p. 176.

^{vi} *Ibid.*