

actions needs to be understood in light of the obedient act that put Peter on the water in the first place. It is not the story of the skeptic who habitually doubts, but the story of the faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him, who begins to lose his nerve when he discovers the odds stacked against him, but who from Jesus finds a steadying, delivering hand. The phrase "you of little faith" occurs in two other places in Matthew—for those anxious about clothing (6:30) and for the disciples in the boat anxious about the storm (8:26).

In this story Peter becomes a mirror in which disciples, ancient and modern, are able to see themselves and to take heart. They find courage from his daring response to Jesus' command and from Jesus' gracious move to secure his faltering faith.

PROPER 15

Ordinary Time 20

*Sunday between
August 14 and 20 inclusive*

There is no indication that the various texts appointed by the lectionary for this day were chosen for congruity of themes. And yet a close reading of these passages discloses that, in one fashion or another, they all speak to the issue of the mercy of God. In addition, several of them also speak of the manner in which God's mercy promotes human reconciliation.

The text from Gen. 45 is part of the climax of the cycle of Joseph stories. How intriguing from a purely literary standpoint is this passage, for it portrays Joseph in a moment of triumph. The trials of the past are over, and his trembling brothers—whose evil intentions sent him to Egypt in the first place—are now in his power. But instead of venting on them a wrathful spirit, Joseph acknowledges God's hand in the events of his life and—in a powerful emotional scene—is reconciled to those who attempted to do him harm.

Psalm 133 is a brief but exuberant song to the spirit of unity and fellowship that can (and should!) exist among the members of the family of God. Community harmony is like precious oil, like mountain dew. It is a blessing from none other than the God of Israel.

Paul, who sharply felt the irony of the rejection of God's Messiah by God's chosen people, in Rom. 11 delivers a resounding "no" to the idea that God has now rejected Israel. One of the results of human disobedience is an outpouring of the mercy of God, and such will surely be the case in the present instance. God's election is irrevocable. In fact, Paul uses daring language which affirms that "all" are the recipients of God's mercy.

The wide umbrella of God's mercy is surely illustrated by the story of Jesus and the Canaanite woman in Matt. 15. The woman's faith and persistence, in a situation where she might easily have been intimidated, serves in a curious manner to minister to Jesus. As she becomes a means of God's grace to Jesus, Jesus extends God's mercy to her.

Genesis 45:1–15

Avarice and greed, jealousy and sibling rivalry, sex, politics, and palace intrigue—such are the ingredients of the story of Joseph! Small wonder that this section of the book of Genesis (chaps. 37–47) has been favorite reading for Jews and Christians over the centuries, for it mirrors human nature in every age. Yet to concentrate on these characteristics exclusively is to lose sight of the central thrust of the cycle of Joseph stories, namely, that in and through all the events of Joseph's life God was at work to save the people. Most immediately the people who benefit from God's grace are old Jacob and his family, but the ultimate object of God's loving intervention in Joseph's life is all humankind.

In terms of the development of the plot of the Joseph stories, this lection from Gen. 45 is crucial. Joseph has now become the virtual ruler of all Egypt, having survived threats to his life and well-being that are familiar to everyone who knows this tale, including a murderous plot by his brothers, attempted seduction by the wife of a powerful Egyptian, and the forgetfulness of the royal cupbearer. The famine that has ravaged Egypt has also desolated Palestine, so that Joseph's brothers, in their efforts to find food, have come face-to-face with the brother whom they earlier had sold into slavery. Yet, in an ironic twist, while Joseph recognizes them, they are ignorant of the identity of this powerful official with whom they have been negotiating and before whom they now stand condemned of theft. In purely literary terms, what could be a juicier turn of events: Joseph, with one wave of his hand, may now avenge the terrible wrong done to him so long ago by snuffing out the life or the liberty of these trembling sons of Jacob.

But that is not Joseph's way, because that is not God's way, and Joseph is—first, last, and always—God's man (notice v. 8). Joseph's virtual collapse in the presence of his brothers reveals his awareness of God's role in his life as much as it reveals his humanity. Only the Egyptians are meant to be excluded from this catharsis, lest they misinterpret Joseph's tears for weakness.

The emotional energy displayed by Joseph is countered by the awestruck dumbness of the eleven. Are they unable to speak simply because they find this revelation hard to believe, or is it out of terror over what might soon happen to them at the hands of their long-lost but now powerful brother? Probably both, but it is their terror-for-their-lives that Joseph addresses by attempting to calm them (v. 5). The reason for comfort that Joseph extends has nothing directly to do with his own emotions, although his concern for his father (v. 3) would doubtless have ruled out any violence against his brothers,

even if Joseph had been so inclined. His brothers are to be at peace because "God sent me before you to preserve life" (v. 5). Notice that the phrase "God sent me" (or its equivalent) is repeated in vs. 7 and 8. (Compare v. 8: "God . . . made me a father to Pharaoh" and v. 9: "God has made me lord of all Egypt.") Not only does Joseph want to reassure his astonished brothers, but those who are responsible for the text, in the shape that it has reached us, want to be sure that we, the readers, do not miss the whole point of the narrative: behind all the events of Joseph's life, God was at work to bring good out of evil.

The arrangements for the family's comfort that Joseph outlines in vs. 10–11 provide a kind of denouement to the drama. The blood still races with excitement over Joseph's startling self-disclosure, but Joseph pushes forward to other things. After urging the inclusion of their father in this new life, Joseph outlines to the eleven what kind of life it will be. In spite of the five years the famine has still to run, theirs will be a time of peace and plenty under Joseph's personal protection. Their families, including children and grandchildren, will be secure, even their flocks and herds. Only then, after Joseph has hugged and kissed them all, are the brothers' tongues unlocked and they begin to talk to him (v. 15).

It is as difficult for modern people as it was for ancient people to believe that God is at work even in the dark and destructive moments of life. One of the great obstacles to faith is that, no matter how hard one tries, it simply is not possible to identify grace or redemption in so many human experiences. And it is easy—some would say, compelling—to extrapolate from that that God is *never* present in human suffering and defeat. But the Joseph stories lead us to a different conclusion, which is that, in spite of the awful tragedies from which God seems irremediably absent, the Ruler of the universe is a caring friend and will ultimately have a friend's way.

So, in the Joseph stories, Joseph is a paradigm of what the grace of God can do in human life: transform a curse into a blessing. But Joseph is himself a metaphor for God: the One who has every reason to reject a wayward human family, but who instead loves them even to the point of the One's own participation in their suffering.

(Note the discussion of most of this lection text at the Seventh Sunday After Epiphany, Year C.)

Psalm 133

This brief psalm is now placed in a larger group of "Songs of Ascents" (Pss. 120–134), presumably grouped together to be used in

pilgrimage toward the Jerusalem Temple. The entire group tends to be buoyant and somewhat celebrative, the kind we might expect in a group of joyous, exuberant pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. Such a literary-liturgical context, however, does not tell us much about the psalm itself.

Psalm 133:1. The theme of the psalm is clear and succinct in the first verse. To have members of an extended family (tribe) living together in harmony and unity is a wondrous thing, "good and pleasant." The alternative, which this poem wants to reject, is that a family should be at cross-purposes, quarrelsome, inclined to hostility, and, in the case of a tribe, given to internecine vengeance. Thus the poem affirms and celebrates a community that functions in a healthy, reconciling way.

This vision of communal harmony may be rooted in a quite concrete social experience. The imagery of vs. 2-3a suggests that this may be a specific agricultural community, one most likely to dispute over land and property (see Luke 12:13).

Verses 2-3a. These lines, focused in two metaphors, are subservient to the theme of v. 1. The poet characterizes the goodness and loveliness of communal harmony in two ways. First, such communal harmony is like precious oil, in which a community may luxuriate when it is festive, secure, and prosperous. Oil was a scarce and precious commodity in a local community, and was to be used only for the essentials of life, such as light and heat. But on festive occasions oil might be "wasted" in extravagance, when one could be showered with it as a sign of peculiar well-being. One can imagine a community without any surplus of riches on occasion permitting itself extravagance that is economically wasteful—life is so good that it must be marked by luxury (cf. Mark 14:3-9). Communal harmony is as good as extravagant oil, overflowing in joy and delight, turning life into a celebration of well-being that is unguarded, careless, and generous. A community at peace is one with more than enough.

Second, communal harmony is like mountain dew. This image may be peculiarly poignant in an arid climate, where any hint of moisture is a special gift and a cause for joy. The two images of oil and dew reinforce each other, and together present a picture of extravagant well-being—that is what harmony is like!

Verse 3b. The incidental reference to Zion in v. 3a permits what appears to be the add-on line of v. 3b. This line seems to have no direct relation to the rest of the poem. Indeed, it has been suggested that the Songs of Ascents have been systematically transformed by additional reference to Zion. This could be the case if older songs have been reused by pilgrims to Jerusalem. In any case, the incidental ref-

erence to Zion in v. 3a in the next line is taken as the main subject. Now Zion is "there." Jerusalem is the place wherein the blessing of God, life forever, is located. But even if this line is somewhat extraneous to the poem, the motif of "blessing" nicely returns to the images of oil and dew, for "blessing" refers to all that enhances and affirms life.

The bold affirmation of our psalm is that shared human community is itself an experience of the life that God intends. Such an equation of shared community with life is a warning against religious individualism, which imagines one can have gospel blessings all alone, one at a time, and against a religious community that may be serious about faith but is contentious and fractious, thereby contradicting its very reason for being. This equation of shared community and life is most poignantly asserted in 1 John 3:14:

We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death.

In quite concrete and practical ways, our psalm anticipates the Johannine transposition of resurrection into genuine community.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

As the reading for Proper 13 identifies God's gifts to Israel, this reading begins with the unavoidable question about the present standing of Israel: "Has God rejected his people?" The resounding "no" of Rom. 11:1 is quickly followed by a variety of arguments (omitted from the lection). First, Paul insists that a remnant does believe (vs. 2-5). Then, he argues that Israel's rejection has served for the inclusion of the Gentiles (vs. 7-12). Third, he turns to Gentile Christians with the claim that the Gentiles have a role to play in the salvation of Israel (vs. 13-16). So Paul reasons in this chapter, characterizing his ministry as that of making Israel jealous of the Gentiles so that the final inclusion of Israel will be great indeed.

The lectionary omits vs. 2b-28, presumably because of the lengthy nature of the point Paul is making here. It is difficult to address any part of this section of the letter in isolation from the whole, so awkward decisions about passages are inevitable. Nevertheless, the reading as presently defined omits a crucial part of Paul's address to the Gentiles: Gentile Christians have no right to boast about their election by God and to exalt themselves above Jews. "If you do boast, remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that

supports you" (v. 18). Gentiles have entered into the community by means of the root of Israel and cannot turn around and boast of their place as if it were their own accomplishment.

Much of Rom. 11 involves Paul in speculation about the way in which events will unfold. Israel will be grafted in again (v. 23). God has hardened Israel temporarily, for the sake of the Gentile mission. At the completion of that mission, Israel will again return (v. 25). Paul here stretches to envision the time when both Gentiles and Jews will fully participate in the blessings inaugurated by Jesus Christ. The details of the future Paul imagines matter far less than the ultimate outcome: the salvation of all God's people. For Paul, the rejection of the Messiah cannot mean that Israel is cut off from God; therefore, it must mean that these events are occurring as part of God's will.

In the second part of the passage as defined by the lectionary, 11:29–32, Paul moves beyond this attempt to explain God's actions and returns to the theological convictions that form the foundation of this section. First, "the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable." To say that Israel was called by God in the past requires, with absolute certainty, the conclusion that Israel is called by God in the present and the future. Regardless of Israel's actions or inactions, the call of God remains in force. This conclusion comes, not because Israel has somehow earned the right to keep God's calling, quite apart from faithfulness or unfaithfulness. This conclusion comes solely because any other conclusion implies that God cannot be counted on, that God is faithless. Romans 9–11 begins with the question, Has God's word failed? and ends with a resounding, No! As often in this letter, what motivates Paul is less the need to explain the human situation (in this instance, Israel's standing before God) than the need to explain the fidelity of God. Regardless of Israel, regardless of the Gentiles, God's word holds secure.

In vs. 30–31 Paul moves to a second point. If God's calling is irrevocable, and yet Israel manifestly does not accept Jesus as Messiah, then there must be a reason for Israel's rejection. Paul locates that reason in the mission to the Gentiles; that is, the disobedience of the Jews has brought about the Gentile mission, and the mercy shown to Gentiles will eventually bring about the inclusion of Jews. Jews have played an unwitting role in the Gentile mission, and Gentiles will play a role in the Jewish mission. That mutuality of Jew and Gentile reflects the fundamental point that they hold in common. Despite their many differences, both Jew and Gentile have been disobedient; God has acted and will act to redeem both. Here the letter circles back to the point made in 1:18–3:21. As surely as all human beings,

Jew and Gentile, have rebelled against God, just as surely God has acted in Jesus Christ to show them mercy.

The final statement of the passage makes explicit Paul's point about the universality of God's grace: "For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all." Taken in isolation, this statement suggests that God has been playing a kind of game with humanity, first casting all humanity into prison, and then setting them free. In the context of Paul's reflection on the ways in which Jew and Gentile have interacted, however, a different reading emerges. God "has imprisoned all in disobedience" means not only that God allowed God's creatures the freedom to rebel, as Rom. 1 makes clear, but also that God has used the rebellion of the Jews for the sake of the inclusion of the Gentiles.

Finally, however, God's goal is that of mercy for all human beings. The universalism of this statement often provokes objections that God's mercy is for all who repent or for all who call on God's name. Often it is those who faithfully serve the church and strive to do good who especially protest this assertion of the breadth of God's mercy. The assertion, however, stands. God's mercy extends to all people, none of whom can claim it by virtue of their own goodness.

Matthew 15:(10–20) 21–28

This marvelous story of Jesus' engagement with the Canaanite woman, her ministry to him, and his ministry to her offers rich resources for preaching, but the story needs to be treated with great care. Interpreters are often scared away by Jesus' use of a rather harsh metaphor for the woman as a non-Jew, a feature of the narrative that simply cannot be ignored or easily dismissed. Any sermon on the text today has to confront honestly the epithet of "dogs" and what it may imply about the relation of Jesus and the woman.

It helps to recognize that this is a story told from a Jewish point of view. Most of us who read it are non-Jews, and it takes an imaginative leap to appreciate its original impact. The woman, of course, is a Canaanite, but she acknowledges Jesus' Jewish status by addressing him as "Son of David." Jesus does not answer her, but when the disciples, annoyed by her persistence, want him to send her away, he says to them, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." We hear in these words echoes of Jesus' earlier charge to the disciples (10:5–6, 23) and the recurring theme of Matthew's narrative that the gospel belongs first to Israel.

Though the Jewish religious authorities repeatedly come in for

scathing judgment, the narrator of this Gospel wants to make absolutely clear that God has not abandoned the Jews, God's faithfulness to the covenant remains, and Jesus' ministry is first and foremost to Israel. There is no equivocating on that point. Only *after* the crucifixion and resurrection is the door thrown wide open to the non-Jewish world (28:16–20). Before that time only here and there in the story—the Magi (2:1–12), the centurion (8:5–13), the Canaanite woman—do we catch glimpses of God's all-inclusive intentions. Thus Jesus' apparent reluctance in responding to the petitions of the Canaanite woman serves to underscore the priority of the Jews in the divine economy.

This gets us to the heart of the story. The Canaanite woman wrenches from Jesus the blessing that she, as a non-Jewish mother, needs. First, she is persistent. She refuses to be deterred either by Jesus' reluctance or by the disciples' irritation. She perseveres in her conviction that Jesus can do for her what she desperately needs. Jesus finally comments, "Woman, great is your faith!" In her single-minded pursuit of Jesus, she presents a remarkable contrast to the scribes and Pharisees with their legal entanglements (15:1–9) and the disciples with their lack of understanding (15:10–20).

But the Canaanite woman is not only persistent; she is free of pretension. Though she comes and kneels before him, Jesus, whose focus is on the primary mission to Israel, addresses to her a severe parable (v. 26). The use of the term "dogs," even though metaphorical and possibly to be translated as "puppies," is hardly a label of endearment. It was regularly applied, with some condescension, to Gentiles. The woman has every right to take offense. But her response, certainly to be read as more than a witty retort, indicates that she is beyond recrimination: "Yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table" (v. 27). She is willing to wear the label as long as she can get food from the table. In effect, she accepts her secondary status as an outsider, a Gentile, but takes the risk of remaining a petitioner.

The woman with her persistence and lack of pretension in a sense performs a ministry for Jesus. She becomes the spokesperson to him to bring about the release of divine grace in a dramatic event of healing. She becomes the model voice from beyond the boundaries who stakes her claim on the mercy and generosity of God. Just as others minister to Jesus by providing food or housing, she ministers by facilitating his movement across ethnic borders, an action that anticipates the wider mission to the world.

But just as the woman ministers to Jesus, Jesus ministers to the woman. Her demon-possessed child is healed. The Son of David ren-

ders wholeness to a Gentile daughter. As in the case of the healing of the centurion's son (8:5–13), there is no touching or dramatic action. The spoken word effects the cure. The miracle of faith is confirmed by the miracle of healing.

If the preacher chooses to include the section 15:10–20, then a remarkable contrast is established between the failure to understand on the part of the crowds, the disciples, and Peter, and the profound understanding of the Canaanite woman. As an outsider, she grasps what they as Jews cannot perceive—that the good news belongs also to the outsiders.