

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost
August 14, 2011

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Title: Outside In
Text: Matthew 15:10–28

In Genesis 32 we read about Jacob’s wrestling match with God on the shores of the Jabbok. Jacob, you may remember, is the grandson of Abraham. It was with Abraham that God cut his covenant, saying: “in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

The wrestling match between Jacob and God that night must have been a good one! As day was breaking, God struck Jacob on his hip socket and put Jacob’s hip out of joint. “Let me go,” God said, “for day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So God said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then God said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.” Jacob, who supplanted his brother Esau by stealing his birthright, was renamed Israel by God, which means “God rules.”

It was from Jacob’s 12 sons that the 12 tribes Israel received their names. God’s covenant to Abraham was being fulfilled through him. But as we move into today’s readings, let us remember the first two words of God’s promise to Abraham, “**in you** all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Those words—the “in you”—of that promise give some context to the good news we hear from the Word of God this morning.

At the center of this Sunday’s readings is the matter of God’s abundant mercy to those who are on the outside of the covenant’s promises, those who *do not* descend from Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In the first reading from Isaiah we read that “soon [God’s] salvation will come, and [his] deliverance [will] be revealed.” This is good news. Even more, though, God extends mercy beyond the outcasts of Israel to include what Isaiah calls “foreigners.”

But God does not abandon the promise to Abraham in doing so. St. Paul reminds us in Romans that “God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.” Indeed, God has not abandoned Israel by extending mercy to others. Rather, when God extends his blessing to others outside the covenant, he does so by making the foreigner *not* so foreign. Listen again to the Word of the Lord from Isaiah:

And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord,
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants,
all who keep the Sabbath, and do not profane it,
and hold fast my covenant —
these I will bring to my holy mountain,
and will make them joyful in my house of prayer;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar;
for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples.

It is the “in you” of God’s promise to Abraham that is promised again in this morning’s reading from Isaiah, for:

Thus says the Lord God,
who gathers the outcasts of Israel,
I will gather others to them
besides those already gathered.

Indeed, God takes foreigners and gathers them into his covenant promises with Israel.

In this context, I am struck by Jesus’ words in the Gospel reading for this morning: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Such a claim by Jesus seems exclusive, if not in direct contradiction of what Isaiah proclaimed. To this point, we do not see a picture of Jesus who opens his arms lovingly to all.

But the woman spoke words of faith, did she not? After all, she not only cried “Have mercy on me,” but in doing so named Jesus “Lord, Son of David.”

In the words of Jesus *and* in the words of the woman, we learn two things: that Jesus is the Messiah of God’s people Israel, and that the woman was an outsider, a “foreigner” to use Isaiah’s language. Jesus, as such, was under no obligation to help her. Yet, like Jacob wrestling with God all night long, the woman persists in her request to Jesus. She knelt before Jesus, saying, “Lord, help me.”

Jesus responded, “It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.” Martin Luther, in his sermon on this same text, said that “There she received her last mortal blow, in that Christ said in her face, as the words tell, that she was a dog.” Luther continues, “What will she say to this!(?) Here [Jesus] presents her in a bad light, she is condemned and an outcast person, who is not to be reckoned among God’s chosen ones.”

What happens next is perhaps the most defining moment in today’s readings. The woman does not become angry and defend her right to receive the Lord’s blessing. Surprisingly, she *agrees* with Jesus’ judgment over her. She *agrees* that she is an outsider, not worthy of the fullness of the kingdom that Jesus brings. Yet, she takes Jesus’ words even one step further and, in a humble act of faith, places herself in the posture of a starving dog, just begging for a morsel of food. She said to Jesus, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

You may remember Jesus’ words to sinking Peter in last week’s Gospel reading: “You of little faith, why did you doubt?” Those words ring in our ears as today we hear Jesus say to the Canaanite woman: “Great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.”

Peter is a disciple of Jesus and, presumably, the woman is only meeting Jesus for the first time. Somehow this story seems inside out. But it isn’t; for, the one in whom the woman places her faith is the very God of Israel made flesh in the person of Jesus. He is the one, she knows, who actually has the power to do something about this demon that is possessing her daughter.

He is the one through whom she gains access to the covenant's promises. To borrow words from St. Paul in Romans 4, her faith, like Abraham's, "was reckoned as righteousness."

She embodies Isaiah's words of a foreigner who joins herself to the Lord by faith. If this story is anything, it is the story of someone on the outside of the covenant's promises being brought in by her encounter with the living Christ.

This morning's readings may be a call from God to the church to consider how it is that we are to be welcoming to the foreigner in our midst. If we are recipients of the covenant's promises by nature of our encounter with the living Christ—in his Word, at the font, at the table—then how is it that we, as Christ's body, share that goodness with all who seek it?

The answer to that question, I believe, is not simply to welcome people into *our* midst as if we were some club of really nice people to whom anyone would want to belong. Rather, the call from God in today's readings, I believe, is that we would welcome people into the goodness of knowing God's only Son, Jesus Christ. It is the "in him," "in Jesus Christ," into which all people, no matter how foreign, are to be welcomed. For it is by *his* cross and passion that he draws all people to himself, including you and me.

St. Paul deals with this extensively in Ephesians, where he reminds the faithful that they too were once strangers, Gentiles by birth, at that time without Christ. "But now," St. Paul reminds us, "in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ."

Indeed, each of us gathered here is an "outsider," a "foreigner" brought near by our baptism into Christ's death. Living each day into our baptism, we die to sin and live into the new life of faith he gives to us through these waters.

To be sure, we all bring something with us this day that is in need of Christ's healing. Each of us has something that proceeds from our heart that defiles. It might be something in that list in today's Gospel reading or it might be something completely different. Aware of the places we sin and fall short of God's glory in our lives, we too stand before God, wrestling with him and begging for even a crumb of mercy.

Yet, like Job and like that woman in today's Gospel reading, by the power of the Holy Spirit, we persist in faith and come before the Lord with arms outstretched. For here, at this table, we encounter the living Christ in a crumb of bread and a sip of wine—truly his body, and the new covenant of his blood, shed for you and for me, for the forgiveness of sins.

In the name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.