

Blessed to Bless

[Genesis 45:1-15](#)

[Psalm 133](#)

[Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32](#)

[Matthew 15: \(10-20\), 21-28](#)

This past week I was scrolling on my phone and had a memory pop up on my social media feed. About 15 years ago on this week in August. I recorded having fed my herd of soggy, shivering horses because we had just gotten so much snow. The horses should have been grazing to keep their body temperatures up, but at that elevation, on that particular year, the growing season was past, the grass had already been eaten down, and the way to keep cold, wet horses, warm is to feed them. Here in Virginia, the idea of snow in August seems impossible, we're just hoping for rain. But I was situated at the base of the Continental Divide, over nine thousand feet in elevation. It is the long, cold season, and deep snowpack of that mountain range that feeds the Colorado River... which provides water for roughly 40 million people across seven states. This is the image I am holding while reading today's Psalm.

Psalm 133 is one of the Songs of Ascent. It is a pilgrimage Psalm that religious Jews would sing on their way to the temple. Travelers would come from all over Israel and far beyond for three annual festivals in Jerusalem. Pilgrims spoke different languages, dressed differently, had different social customs, represented different cultures with different views of the world. And on their travels, they would sing a song that began, "Oh, how good and pleasant it is when brethren live together in unity". This Psalm helped shape their hearts for solidarity as they approached a place where they would be faced with many opportunities for division.

The Psalm goes on to talk about the blessing that unified people can be for others. It illustrates this idea with both oil and dew. Oil is the symbol of the Holy Spirit. When it anoints the head of Aaron, the priest, it drips down from his head onto his clothing. The implication is that the Spirit will then pour from him onto those he serves. Likewise, dew on the mountains runs down and waters the land below. Incidentally, Mount Hermon is roughly the same elevation as my home in

Colorado. And Hermon is located far north of Jerusalem. When the Psalm says the dew on Hermon falls on the hills of Zion it's making the point that nourishing moisture that falls far, far away will bless distant lands. In the Kingdom of God, the Lord ordains blessing to flow outward. And that blessing flows best when we don't place walls around it. Our **unity** is praised in the Psalm because it is a **conduit** for blessing.

Joseph understood this. His brothers sold him into slavery. He knew better than anyone the consequences of disunity! He had been away from his family for 22 years when he encountered his brothers. All of Egypt owed their lives to Joseph because it was his relationship with God and his willingness to put himself at risk that made provision for them in the midst of famine. When Joseph's brothers came crawling into Egypt looking for rescue from that same famine, Joseph could have sent them away. But he recognized that God placed him where he was to be a conduit of blessing that would save his whole family... ultimately preserving the covenant given to his great great grandfather. For Joseph, unity was not some poetic ideal. It required radical forgiveness. But he knew who he was, He understood why God had allowed his story to be written the way it was, and he knew the power of the blessing in his hand. He could have withheld it. But he chose to let it flow from him to bless others far beyond the lives of his own people.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, we hear him also arguing against division. In case you haven't noticed, the Hebrew people are continually being used to show us the kindness and compassion of God. The Hebrew folks, shown as Joseph's brothers in Egypt, pop up here because they have rejected their own Messiah. You don't have to be ethnically Jewish to relate with people who cause harm to the people they should love or to reject Christ. Likewise, Paul argues that both Jewish people and non-Jewish people are all stuck under the same reality. And that reality is disobedience to God. Paul describes our universal disregard for God with the word imprisoned, but it more literally means that we are all corralled together in **the same** paddock. You might be a white sheep, and I might be a black sheep, but Jew or Gentile, we are all in the same holding

pen together. And regardless of our parentage or the color of our fur, we are all beneficiaries of the same mercy.

Matthew's gospel shows Jesus teaching the same thing twice. Today's first story shows Jesus talking to a group of pharisees who were worried about upholding ritual purity by keeping the Law. They had just watched Jesus' disciple eating with unwashed hands, a no-no. Jesus essentially says that categorizing people based on the appearance of their behavior is a problem. In God's kingdom, true spiritual purity comes from having a clean heart, not religious adherence.

Immediately after that encounter, almost as if he's trying to prove his point, Jesus takes his disciples away into gentile territory where they encounter a Canaanite woman. Calling her a Canaanite would have been like calling her a Philistine. Her ancestors literally fought to keep God's people out of the Promised Land. This woman was not just a foreigner; she was one of Israel's ancient and sworn enemies. And... she was a woman addressing a group of men. This is not just about disunity; this is about division. Jesus likens her to a dog, which was a racial slur highlighting just how much distance existed between them. It shocks us to hear Jesus say those words, but I think he was indicting the disciples by naming aloud what they were already thinking. And she doesn't even resist the insult. She embraces it and uses it to her advantage.

Here's the thing. She seemed to know God and understand Jesus better than his own disciples. She called Jesus the Son of David, making a claim on his messianic identity, an identity his own followers were still trying to figure out how to accept. This was a group of people who had seen Jesus multiply bread to feed thousands of people mere days before. And this foreign female, who wasn't there to witness that event, still seemed to recognize that in God's kingdom, even discarded crumbs are sufficient because they fall from a limitless table.

This woman was not trying to convert to Judaism. She wasn't planning to pack her things and begin following Jesus around the countryside. All she wanted was relief for her daughter. And

she was certain that Jesus' power was greater than the demon tormentors. He was the only one with that kind of authority. So, she came to him and tenaciously asked.

There are only two accounts of Jesus praising people for having great faith. One was a Roman Centurian. The other was this Canaanite woman. Both of them, gentiles. Neither of them, disciples. We think faith must be curated within the walls of our religious establishments to be pleasing to God. But we, like the disciples, like the pharisees, are the ones who situate boundary lines. God is forever reaching past them, proving the blessings of the kingdom are meant to flow beyond us.

According to Paul, we are all a mess. There isn't a person on this planet who is not equally in need of God's mercy. In some way we are all a victim like Joseph, a slave-trader like his brothers, a foreigner like the Canaanite, and tormented like her daughter. We are all in this together, all bound together by sin and by mercy. The blessings of the kingdom were never meant to be hoarded or portioned out in limited quantities to the deserving. None of us are deserving! Oil and dew flow out, they move beyond the places they start. We are meant to be conduits of those blessings. As Christians, we should be the ones who notice and accept those blessings first, but we are not gatekeepers of God's bounty. When we eat until we are full but refuse to fill the bellies of those around us with the spiritual and practical necessities that facilitate fullness of life, we are like the disciples who tried to send away the woman Jesus praised.

In a moment we will all come to the same table. The bread we receive is the body of the one death could not contain, and because it couldn't contain him, it cannot contain what he gives. There is no bottom to this table. There never has been.

May we be a people who show the world truly how good and pleasant it is when we live together in unity.

