

Divergence on the Lectionary - Proper 15, Year A (track one)

First Reading

Genesis 45:1–15

Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him. He cried, “Make everyone go out from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud, so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, for they were dismayed at his presence.

So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 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. 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 tarry. You shall dwell in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, and your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. There I will provide for you, for there are yet five years of famine to come, so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty.’ And now your eyes see, and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see, that it is my mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father of all my honor in Egypt, and of all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. After that his brothers talked with him. (ESV)

Second Reading (excluded verses in italics)

Romans 11:1-2a, 29–32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! For I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew.

Do you not know what the Scripture says of Elijah, how he appeals to God against Israel? "Lord, they have killed your prophets, they have demolished your altars, and I alone am left, and they seek my life." But what is God's reply to him? "I have kept for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal." So too at the present time there is a remnant, chosen by grace. But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.

What then? Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it, but the rest were hardened, as it is written,

*"God gave them a spirit of stupor,
eyes that would not see
and ears that would not hear,
down to this very day."*

And David says,

*"Let their table become a snare and a trap,
a stumbling block and a retribution for them;
let their eyes be darkened so that they cannot see,
and bend their backs forever."*

So I ask, did they stumble in order that they might fall? By no means! Rather, through their trespass salvation has come to the Gentiles, so as to make Israel jealous. Now if their trespass means riches for the world, and if their failure means riches for the Gentiles, how much more will their full inclusion mean!

Now I am speaking to you Gentiles. Inasmuch then as I am an apostle to the Gentiles, I magnify my ministry in order somehow to make my fellow Jews jealous, and thus save some of them. For if their rejection means the reconciliation of the world, what will their acceptance mean but life from the dead? If the dough offered as firstfruits is holy, so is the whole lump, and if the root is holy, so are the branches.

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, "Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in." That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness

and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again. For if you were cut from what is by nature a wild olive tree, and grafted, contrary to nature, into a cultivated olive tree, how much more will these, the natural branches, be grafted back into their own olive tree.

Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers: a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in. And in this way all Israel will be saved, as it is written,

*“The Deliverer will come from Zion,
he will banish ungodliness from Jacob”;
“and this will be my covenant with them
when I take away their sins.”*

As regards the gospel, they are enemies for your sake. But as regards election, they are beloved for the sake of their forefathers.

For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. For just as you were at one time disobedient to God but now have received mercy because of their disobedience, so they too have now been disobedient in order that by the mercy shown to you they also may now receive mercy. For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. (ESV)

Gospel Text

Matthew 15:(10-20) 21–28

(And he called the people to him and said to them, “Hear and understand: it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person, but what comes out of the mouth; this defiles a person.” Then the disciples came and said to him, “Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?” He answered, “Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted will be rooted up. Let them alone; they are blind guides. And if the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit.” But Peter said to him, “Explain the parable to us.” And he said, “Are you also still without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach and is expelled? But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness,

slander. These are what defile a person. But to eat with unwashed hands does not defile anyone.”)

And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon. And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and was crying, “Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David; my daughter is severely oppressed by a demon.” But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying, “Send her away, for she is crying out after us.” He answered, “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” But she came and knelt before him, saying, “Lord, help me.” And he answered, “It is not right to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.” She said, “Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.” Then Jesus answered her, “O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.” And her daughter was healed instantly. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Once, many years ago, as my six year old daughter and I were walking home from church in Manhattan, she asked me, “Daddy, do you think God lets us do what we want to do, or are we more like dolls in his dollhouse?” Stunned, it took me a while to formulate an answer that might make sense to a six year old. Finally I replied, “Well, honey, I think mostly God lets us do what we want to do. It’s kind of like He winds us up and points us in the direction He wants us to go, but then it’s up to us.”

She thought about that for a few moments and then said, “No, I think were more like dolls in the dollhouse.” I didn’t argue. That’s an entirely appropriate theology for a six year old.

The author of today’s reading from Genesis would likely have agreed with her, at least in part. Our Genesis text confronts us with the same questions concerning free will and God’s control that my daughter was wrestling with. Joseph asserts that the brothers’ decision to cast him into a pit, then sell him into slavery in Egypt was all God’s doing, accomplished so that he might finally save them from famine.

If that’s true, does that absolve them of guilt? Did they have a choice? And if they didn’t, how can they be blamed? Does God really work like that? What about God hardening the heart of Pharaoh against Moses and his people in Exodus? Where, if anywhere, does free will enter in? If I agree that God does work this way, must I then sign on to some sort of extreme Calvinism/Predestinarianism?

I have, from time to time, (not often, thankfully) heard some Christians comfort those who are being harmed/persecuted with words like, “Hang in there, God is just preparing you for your Joseph moment.” I’m not sure they’ve fully considered the meaning of what they say. Do they really mean to convey that God is the *cause* of their suffering? That God *wills* that they be persecuted or harmed? Even if it is for some as yet unseen greater good, what sort of monster does that make God?

It only requires a small shift in the wording to make better sense. “Hang in there. God will use what you’re passing through to bless you and others. He will turn the ill intention of your persecutors on its head.” While this may be of small comfort to someone in great tribulation, (and honestly, I’d be very unlikely to say it) it does fit God better, doesn’t it? “For those who love God, all things work together for good for those who are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28) God doesn’t cause the evil that afflicts, but He transforms them so that the evil others intend works to the good.

The whole question of the presence of evil in a world created and overseen by a good and omnipotent God (known as theodicy) goes way beyond the scope of this or any Divergence. Many would argue that the two cannot exist in the same universe, and therefore deny God’s existence. Personally, I don’t find that discussion to be very edifying on either side. But today’s reading does suggest that not all the authors of the Bible had the same answers about evil and free will.

Second Reading

Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, our second reading omits all those verses from Romans that would cause us to wrestle with some of the same questions as we found in the text from Genesis. So of course, I perversely included them.

It does appear that Paul attributes the same kind of activity to God that Joseph does, suggesting that the Jews’ failure to accept Jesus is directly attributable to God’s having hardened their hearts. All of this done in order to open the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles.

As Joseph was trying to do with his brothers, Paul appears to be doing with his siblings, absolve them of guilt. If their hearts were hardened, how can they be held responsible for their decision? The goal is understandable, but the solution is very awkward.

Here we have another example of why it is so important to read Romans and all of Paul’s letters for what they were, letters with a specific community and situation in mind. If we were to read Romans with the more traditional idea that the divisions in the congregation(s) were between Gentile believers and Jewish believers in Christ, then this

passage loses all meaning. But when we understand (with Mark Nanos) that the divisions are between (largely) Gentile Christians and the Jews in whose synagogues they still worship, our reading this week from Romans takes on a sharper focus and poignancy. Paul isn't speaking to a congregation to whom Israel is a distant relation, he's writing to believers who are seated right next to faithful Jews in worship.

His zeal to relieve these Christians of any sense of superiority because of their decisions to believe leads him to attribute to God a certain callousness as to the freedom of those whose hearts He hardened. His desire is to see compassion spring up where arrogance would like to bloom. Perhaps he can be forgiven for overlooking God's gift of freedom in that moment, for to him, it was just a moment, an argument made for a very particular situation, not a theological statement for all time.

Gospel Text

Our reading this week from Matthew comes on the heels of the Pharisees' criticism of Jesus' followers eating with unwashed hands. It is this criticism that prompts the teaching in the first half of the Gospel text. I find the decision to include (even optionally) this teaching on what defiles without the preceding pericope very curious. Likewise, using it as an introduction to the story of the Canaanite woman makes even less sense, but this is what we're given. When I was leading worship on a weekly basis and choosing the lessons, I almost always chose to include anything that was optional. The more Scripture we hear in worship, the better. I don't think I'd have included verses 10-20.

Still, we have them, so we'll spend some time examining them. Christians take for granted the teaching that it is what comes out of the human heart that defiles, not what is put into the mouth. Read in the context of the first century, though, this teaching is provocative. Jesus even comments, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this saying?" We can deduce from this that Matthew's congregation finds them similarly offensive to the Jewish leadership of their day.

What is perhaps most significant in this part of our reading from Matthew (if we use it) is the way that the tensions between Jesus and the Jewish leaders has escalated over the last few chapters. Once we begin chapter 16, the conflict has entered its final phase, that which leads to Jesus' crucifixion. In chapter 16, the Pharisees and the Sadducees take up Satan's role in opposing Jesus, they "test" Him. What began with them questioning Jesus within themselves has come to the point of overt and open opposition. Where we are in this week's reading is teetering on the edge of that precipice.

I found a fascinating article Jack Dean Kingsbury on the role of the Jewish leadership in Matthew's narrative that I strongly recommend. It can be found on JSTOR.org (which allows 100 free articles per month to non-subscribing members!) and is well worth the read. Here's a link.

[The Developing Conflict between Jesus and the Jewish Leaders in Matthew's Gospel: A Literary-Critical Study](#)

I wouldn't like to go, though, without talking for a moment about Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman. (In Mark, she's from SyroPhoenicia) Here Jesus extends mercy to a woman of great faith, even though she isn't one of "the lost sheep of Israel."

In Matthew's day, the mission to the Gentiles would have been in full swing. The inclusion of this story would have been important in that it grounded this mission in the life and ministry of Jesus, not the work of Paul and his co-laborers. But what is most striking is Jesus' way of referring to the woman as one of "the dogs." This harshness towards one who believes in Him and cries out to Him for help takes many readers aback, myself included, unless we read it correctly.

And this is what I believe to be the correct way to read these few verses.

The woman has been crying out to Jesus, begging Him to heal her demon-oppressed daughter. Jesus has remained silent, though doubtless He knows what He plans to do. Knowing the hearts of those around Him, the woman's, but most especially those of His disciples, He waits until they complain to Him, asking Him to send her away. They do not believe her to be worthy of His attentions, His mercy. They believe her to be one of "the dogs." So once they've spoken, Jesus gives voice to *their* opinion, that it is not right to give the children's food to the dogs. He speaks their hearts, and then allows the woman to rebuke them for Him by her humble assertion that even dogs eat the crumbs that fall from the table. Then He reinforces that rebuke by declaring the greatness of the woman's faith.

The words concerning "the dogs" were not Jesus describing His own belief, but that of those around Him. I think that Matthew includes this story so that he might also speak to the hearts of those in his congregation who also think of the Gentiles as "dogs," and still unworthy of the Gospel.