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“Who are the Chosen?”

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Who are the Chosen?

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15: 10-28

Pent 13A

Sermon by Sharon Rhodes-Wickett
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I have heard of a doormat that reads, "Friends welcome, *relatives* by appointment." I am sure that is the doormat that Joseph needed to have in front of his door.

You remember Joseph, who was the most favored by his father Jacob, and detested by his older brothers. Some family dynamics do continue throughout the generations.

Leading up to this reading the brothers threw Joseph and his beautiful Technicolor coat into a big ditch, and then instead of killing him, sold him off as a slave. They reported to their father Jacob that he had been killed.

Joseph ended up in a foreign country, in Egypt. He learned how to "pass" as an Egyptian, and worked his way up to be chief advisor to the Pharaoh.

That was a painful process itself, landing him in jail where his ability to interpret dreams served him well. Long story short, Joseph is good at predicting the futures. (*Maybe we could use him now!*) Because of his good investments and planning, when a great famine hit all of the Middle East, Egypt had enough food for its citizens and even more to share.

Word gets to Canaan that Egypt is selling its excess of grain, and so off go Jacob's sons to get food for the starving family.

Who do they do business with, but one older, wiser, buff, Egyptian dude named Joseph – whom they do not recognize as their own brother...the one they sold off as a slave, as good as dead.

The plot of the story is just too delicious, isn't it? This is the moment we've all been waiting for, the moment when the tables are turned and Joseph has all the power. Joseph has a great job, he's bilingual, he's got the key to the granary and he could gleefully watch his brothers squirm at the moment of recognition.

But Joseph doesn't do any of that.

Today's reading in Genesis begins at that point, when he sends everyone away but his brothers, and he then opens up the flood gates of pain that result from estrangement and betrayal and he sobs and wails so loudly it can be heard through the doors and beyond.

Then follows a most tender act of reconciliation: Joseph says to them, "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."

His family then joined him in Egypt, and this story tells us how the Hebrews came to be immigrants in Egypt, where they multiplied and did hard labor for many years in the land.

These are the same Hebrews Moses later led out of Egypt to the Promised Land, to Canaan, which today is known to us as Israel and Palestine.

The texts about the movement of the Hebrews to Canaan reflect a theology of Divine Election. In other words, they believed they were called by God, they were chosen by God, to obliterate the people of Canaan and take over.

It's pretty gruesome stuff. In Deuteronomy 7:1-6 it reads:

"When the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are about to enter and occupy, and clears away many nations before you – and when the Lord your God gives them over to you and you defeat

them, then you must utterly destroy them. Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy. ... break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire. For you are a people holy to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession."

Now, I want you to let that passage sit there for a minute, and I will come back to it. But while it is still stinging your ears, let us recognize that this theology is part of the heritage of Jesus. This is his land.

Let's turn then to the Gospel reading: In the passage from Matthew Jesus gave a rip-roaring critique of the ridiculousness of legalism and summed it up saying that what comes out of your mouth reveals what is in your heart. That counts more than if you washed your hands or not.

Off he goes to another region, and what comes out of Jesus mouth? Yikes!! He just revealed legalistic narrow-minded thinking unlike his teachings. Is that what is truly in Jesus' heart?

The Canaanite woman seeks healing for her daughter and Jesus basically says, "I don't have to talk to you, you Canaanite! I'm here for the Israelites!" Then he basically called her a dog.

Oh how the scholars and preachers have agonized over this story over the generations. They have tried all kinds of ways to make Jesus look better than this.

What makes sense to me, though, in this tale is that Jesus hears the woman's reply and it judges his behavior. He sees himself in light of her point of view and he changes his position. Jesus becomes a more accessible and redeeming Savior. God uses this encounter just as miraculously as God transforms Joseph and his brothers' enmity into reconciliation.

Jesus may have been entrenched in the idea of divine election in his response to her, as reflected in Deuteronomy 7. This was his homeland. His vision of his mission had smaller borders.

The Canaanite woman helped Jesus see a bigger world, beyond the borders of Israel. As a result he expanded his understanding of his mission. He changed, he repented, he was transformed.

I am excited about a messiah like that! This is a messiah who interacts, who engages with the world, who experiences, reacts, changes, and expects us to do the same. Jesus revealed vulnerability.

Healing resulted from the exchange between the woman and Jesus. They both experienced healing.

But that is not always the outcome. Israel/Palestine, the land called Canaan in the Old Testament, is still in tragic violent turmoil several millennia later. The notion of divine election, of having the right to displace the original occupants of the land still influences policy and behavior.

The idea of Divine Election not only permeated Jewish theology, but Christian theology as well. I believe this has made it murkier for us to assess the situation in the Middle East. Perhaps it is because we in this country did the same thing to the people who already lived here. We feel ambivalent about it at best, and at worst we justify occupation of other lands. We live in a country that continues to militarily occupy other countries when there is financial or material benefit to us.

Our own religion has persecuted others because we thought we had God's point of view as our own. Witness the Crusades of the Middle Ages. Certainly such brutal massacre was born of some notion of being on the right side of God.

But this is but one thread of the mixed and rich tapestry which is our Judeo Christian heritage. There are other threads from the same source that weave a very different pattern.

From the same book, Deuteronomy, we get another theological view - chapter 25: ¹⁴*You shall not withhold the wages of poor and needy laborers, whether other Israelites or aliens who reside in your land in one of your towns.* ¹⁵*You shall pay them their wages daily before sunset, because they are poor and their livelihood depends on them; otherwise they might cry to the Lord against you, and you would incur guilt.*

¹⁷*You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in*

pledge. ¹⁸Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. ¹⁹When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the Lord your God may bless you in all your undertakings. ²⁰When you beat your olive trees, do not strip what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²¹When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, do not glean what is left; it shall be for the alien, the orphan, and the widow. ²²Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore I am commanding you to do this.

Earlier in Deuteronomy we read that the Hebrews were to commit genocide on the residents of Canaan.

Later in the same book we read about justice and caring for the marginalized, including the alien. Why? Because the Israelites knew what it was like to be aliens in another land, and they should show hospitality and generosity to those who are not like them.

Both points of view were understood to be God's call to the people. Both calls are threads in the tapestry of our Biblical heritage. There is not a single unified narrative. There are themes that arc through the various narratives, but there are also messy stories about messy human beings and how they tried to make sense of it all. There are stories about how they understood God and what they thought God was leading them to do. Our Biblical heritage is a jumble of cries for vengeance and cries for justice. Cries for violence and calls for peace. There are calls to commit genocide and calls to provide hospitality to the stranger.

It is important for us to remember this, because we have choices.

One reason is that some people want to reduce the Bible to easy, digestible platitudes. "The Bible says so" is the refrain. We understand that the Bible is more complex and richer than that.

A second reason why we need to remember that is so that we can speak up when someone maligns another religion based on a small portion of their sacred writings.

After 9-11 there came a flurry of emails purporting to quote sections from the Quran that advocated violence. The emails cited these passages to make the point that Islam is evil. Many of the so-called passages were fabrications and are not found in the Quran; and further we can find plenty of examples of violence commanded by God in our own Sacred Text, the Bible. So we better not be throwing any stones before we know from whence we come.

Like our own family traditions, our faith tradition is made up of bumbler, thieves, greedy people, who God used for the transformation of the world. They didn't always get it right, but God's Spirit moves and transforms our meager efforts for good in the world.

We live with estrangement and hurt, whether it is in our families, our church family, our city, our world. The Christian faith does not provide a safe haven where we hide from it. To follow Jesus is to engage with it and seek and make reconciliation and peace. We must choose.

Palestinian Christian, Sami Awad wrote a few days ago:

"I am proud of the fact that when it comes to the Palestinian community, with all the challenges, hardships, and divisions that we face, religious identity remains a sacred space, honored by the greatest overwhelming majority. It brings me the greatest joy to see Palestinians (Christians and Muslims) deeply engaged and committed to nonviolence. It gives me even greater pleasure when I see the growing number of Israeli Jews join us hand in hand in this struggle.

"My prayer is that a new question will arise from my Christian friends in the U.S. and Europe and from our churches across the globe: What can we do to help you (Christians, Muslims and Jews) end this occupation and conflict, once and for all, and create a peace in the Holy Land that will bring us all pride in our religious faith, teachings and heritage?" ⁱ

Like Jesus, we feel the sting of judgment from the question, and we also feel the possibilities for hope and transformation. God is at work.

God influences for good even in the most evil situations. When it looks the most bleak, God finds a way...and you may be one of the ways God will bring good!! So you've got to be listening, discerning, praying, be ready for how God is prompting you. And then act!

Yes, we are called...and so are others in other faith traditions. I don't think God knows such distinctions. We are called to live in community and make peace born of justice. We are called from the south, the north, the east and west.

You are Chosen. How is God calling you?

You choose to respond.

ⁱ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sami-awad/palestinian-nonviolence-c_b_905095.html

Also consulted: The New Interpreter's Bible and www.processandfaith.org