

The People We Didn't Expect God to Save

Genesis 45:1–15; Romans 11:13–32; Matthew 15:21–28

I wonder if one of the things human beings are particularly good at is drawing boundaries.

We draw boundaries between *us* and *them*.

Between those who belong and those who don't.

Between people who are deserving and those who aren't.

Between those we trust and those we don't.

Between those we believe God could possibly love and those we quietly assume God must be disappointed with.

Sometimes those boundaries are necessary. We need boundaries to protect people, to establish justice, to make communities safe and to give shape to our lives.

But sometimes our boundaries become bigger than God's.

And that is what makes these three readings so interesting.

Because in each of them, God is doing something that somebody did not expect.

Joseph's brothers did not expect forgiveness.

The Gentile Christians in Rome were being warned not to assume that they had somehow replaced Israel.

And the Canaanite woman certainly did not expect that Jesus would call *her* faith "great."

In all three readings, we encounter the same extraordinary truth:

God's mercy is bigger than our boundaries.

Joseph's story is perhaps one of the most extraordinary stories of forgiveness in the Bible.

His brothers had hated him.

They had been jealous of him.

They had sold him into slavery and left him for dead.

Years later, famine brings those same brothers to Egypt. They are standing before Joseph, although they do not recognise him.

And Joseph knows exactly who they are.

Imagine what is happening inside him.

Here are the men who destroyed his childhood.

Here are the people responsible for the suffering he has carried for years.

And now Joseph has power over them.

He could punish them.

He could humiliate them.

He could make them experience the fear and helplessness they once inflicted upon him.

But instead Joseph sends everyone else out, and finally says:

"I am Joseph."

His brothers are terrified.

And then Joseph does something remarkable.

He does not deny what happened.

He doesn't say, "Oh, it was nothing. Don't worry about it."

He knows exactly what they did.

But he refuses to allow their sin to have the final word.

He says:

"God sent me before you to preserve life."

That does not mean that what the brothers did was good. It wasn't.

It means that God has somehow taken what human beings intended for destruction and woven it into a larger story of redemption.

And Joseph weeps.

He embraces his brothers.

The relationship that was broken begins to be restored.

This is one of the most beautiful things about biblical forgiveness.

Forgiveness is not pretending that the wound never happened.

It is not saying that evil doesn't matter.

It is refusing to allow the wound to determine the whole future.

Joseph has been wounded, but he will not allow himself to remain imprisoned by what was done to him.

God's mercy creates a future where Joseph could only see a past.

And then Paul comes along in Romans and gives us another kind of boundary.

The early Church was wrestling with the question of Jews and Gentiles.

Who belongs to God's people?

The Gentiles have come to faith in Christ. They have been welcomed into the community. And it would have been very easy for them to begin thinking:

"We are the new people of God. We have got it right. Those other people have missed out."

Paul will have none of it.

He gives them the image of an olive tree.

Some branches have been broken off, and Gentile believers have been grafted in.

But then Paul says something that is designed to stop them in their tracks:

"Do not boast over the branches."

In other words:

Don't get too proud about belonging.

You didn't create the tree.

You didn't grow the roots.

You didn't make the promises.

You were grafted into a story that began long before you arrived.

And Paul insists that the branches that have been broken off can be grafted in again.

Why?

Because the character of God is mercy.

Paul eventually reaches the extraordinary conclusion:

"For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all."

Mercy is the great theme.

And that is important because Christians can sometimes become very good at turning grace into a possession.

We receive God's grace and then somehow imagine that it belongs to us.

We can begin to think that we are the insiders.

We understand.

We have the right theology.

We belong.

And there are others who are somehow less acceptable.

But Paul says: Don't boast.

You are here by grace.

You stand by grace.

And if you have received mercy, you have no business becoming stingy with it.

Then we come to the Gospel, and Matthew gives us one of the most uncomfortable encounters in the ministry of Jesus.

A Canaanite woman approaches Jesus.

She is an outsider.

She is a Gentile.

She comes from a people with a long and difficult history with Israel.

And yet she comes crying:

"Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David."

Notice that.

She knows who Jesus is.

She calls him "Lord."

She calls him "Son of David."

And she asks for mercy—not for herself, but for her daughter.

At first Jesus seems to ignore her.

The disciples want her dismissed.

"Send her away," they say.

And then Jesus says something that is difficult for us to hear:

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel."

The woman does not give up.

"Lord, help me."

And then comes the most difficult saying:

"It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."

There have been many attempts to explain these words. Perhaps Jesus is testing her. Perhaps he is deliberately drawing out her faith. Perhaps the conversation reveals the movement of his own mission beyond the boundaries originally understood.

Whatever interpretation we choose, Matthew makes the outcome unmistakable.

The woman persists.

And Jesus finally says:

"Woman, great is your faith!"

Great faith.

Not the disciples.

Not the religious authorities.

Not someone from within Israel.

A Canaanite woman.

The outsider becomes the example.

The person whom everyone expected to remain outside is the person Jesus publicly honours.

And her daughter is healed.

I think Matthew wants us to sit with the discomfort of that.

Because it asks us a very uncomfortable question:

Who are the people we have decided are outside?

Who are the people we think God couldn't possibly be interested in?

Who are the people whose faith we might be tempted to dismiss?

Who are the people we find difficult to welcome?

And perhaps even more challenging:

Could God be using those people to teach us something about faith?

That is what is so powerful about these readings.

Joseph discovers that reconciliation is possible with the people who hurt him.

Paul tells the Gentiles that they must not become proud insiders.

Jesus reveals that an outsider can possess a faith greater than anyone expected.

Again and again, God is expanding the circle.

But there is another side to these readings.

They are not simply telling us to be nice to everyone.

They are telling us something much deeper about the nature of God.

God is merciful.

God's mercy is not a limited resource.

It does not run out because someone else receives it.

There is no shortage of grace.

The fact that God loves someone else does not diminish God's love for us.

The fact that God welcomes someone we did not expect does not make our own welcome less secure.

In fact, the opposite is true.

If God's mercy is genuinely infinite, then the Church should be the place where people discover that there is always room for one more.

This is especially important for us as Christians because we can easily confuse faithfulness with defensiveness.

We can become guardians of boundaries rather than witnesses to grace.

We can spend enormous energy deciding who is properly inside the circle.

But Jesus seems much more interested in what happens when the circle gets wider.

And this does not mean that truth doesn't matter.

It does not mean that justice doesn't matter.

It does not mean that harmful behaviour should simply be ignored.

Joseph doesn't pretend that his brothers' betrayal was acceptable.

Paul doesn't erase the story of Israel.

Jesus doesn't abandon the particular mission entrusted to him.

But within all of those things, God's mercy is constantly creating unexpected possibilities.

Perhaps this is where the readings become especially personal.

Most of us know what it is like to be on both sides of the boundary.

There have probably been times when we have felt like outsiders.

Times when we wondered whether we belonged.

Times when we felt that our past had disqualified us.

Times when we wondered whether God could really have mercy on us.

And perhaps there have also been times when we have been the ones standing safely inside the circle, looking outward.

These readings tell us that neither position is quite as secure as we imagine.

To the outsider, God says:

There is mercy for you.

To the insider, God says:

You are here by grace. Don't boast.

And to the wounded person, like Joseph:

You do not have to let what happened to you determine the rest of your story.

There is a beautiful thread running through all three readings.

Joseph moves from **betrayal to reconciliation**.

Paul moves from **exclusion to inclusion**.

The Canaanite woman moves from **outsider to honoured disciple**.

And beneath all three is the same truth:

God's mercy is bigger than our boundaries.

Perhaps the invitation for us this week is to ask where our own boundaries have become too small.

Is there someone we have decided cannot change?

Is there someone we have quietly written off?

Is there a group of people whose presence makes us uncomfortable?

Is there someone we find it difficult to forgive?

Or perhaps there is a part of ourselves that we have decided is beyond God's mercy.

The Gospel says: think again.

Joseph's brothers were not beyond forgiveness.

The Gentiles were not beyond God's covenant purposes.

The Canaanite woman was not beyond the reach of Jesus.

And neither are we.

God's mercy is always larger than the circle we draw around ourselves.

So perhaps our prayer today is very simple:

Lord, enlarge our hearts.

Teach us to receive your mercy without becoming proud.

Teach us to offer forgiveness without denying the reality of hurt.

Teach us to recognise faith in people we did not expect.

And teach us to trust that your grace is not diminished when it is given away.

For the God revealed in these readings is a God whose mercy keeps crossing boundaries.

And if we are willing to follow that God, perhaps we will discover that the Church becomes most truly itself not when it protects the boundaries of belonging, but when it becomes a living sign of the extravagant mercy of God.

Amen.

