

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

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Proper 15A 2008

\In the Name of our One ever creating, ever loving, and ever sustaining God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today's reading from the Hebrew Scriptures is the last we will hear this year of the stories of the Patriarchs from the Book of Genesis. In today's reading Joseph, now in charge of Pharaoh's treasury and government, finally reveals himself to his brothers who had long ago sold him into slavery. The scene is an emotional one – one so personal that beforehand Joseph sends away his guards and other attendants. This now is strictly family business: the business of true reconciliation. Joseph points out God's hand in this. Providence, he tells his brothers, led him to Egypt for a reason. Otherwise, he notes, he would not be here as Lord of Egypt under Pharaoh able to save his family and, with it, God's promise to the Patriarchs of Israel.

Many of you may know the entire story, but I'd like to do a little fill-in and urge you to reread the whole story of Joseph in your bibles. When Joseph arrived as a young man in Egypt he was sold as a slave to Potiphar, Pharaoh's captain of the guard. The Lord was with Joseph and he was hard working and competent. Eventually, his master made Joseph his overseer of his house in charge of all he had. Now the story gets to be a bit like one of those Korean soap operas that are so addictive. Joseph, Genesis tells us, was handsome and good looking and Potiphar's wife was bored with wandering eyes. When he rebuffs her advances, she lies to her husband, turns the truth on its head and Potiphar has Joseph unjustly imprisoned.

But the Lord was with Joseph in prison and he eventually became head assistant to the chief jailer. Joseph later finds himself in charge of two new prisoners, Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and chief baker. Joseph interprets their dreams telling the chief cupbearer to remember him when he is released and restored to his position. Tell Pharaoh of my innocence, he pleads. But the cupbearer forgets and the years go by. Eventually, when Pharaoh is tormented by dreams, the cupbearer remembers Joseph; Joseph is then summoned to Pharaoh to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. The Lord is with Joseph and he successfully predicts the coming famine and the way the kingdom should prepare in order to survive it.

Joseph is thus holding all the aces when his brothers by their father to Egypt to buy grain in order to survive the famine. Joseph is sending them off with the grain to bring home but asks them to leave behind Benjamin, the youngest brother born after Joseph was sold into slavery and now the father's favorite. He reveals himself to his brothers when Judah, the one who came up with the idea of selling Joseph into slavery, begs for Benjamin – telling Joseph of his father's grief over the loss of Joseph and his equal love for this new son.

In our gospel story, Jesus has received the criticism of the Pharisees that his disciples religiously defile themselves by breaking the traditions of the elders and not washing their hands before eating. Jesus challenges the Pharisees' interpretation of the law and their giving all parts of the law equal weight. In today's reading, Jesus notes that it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles but what comes out of the mouth. All food that goes into the mouth, whether pure or impure under the law, will eventually become waste. What comes out of the mouth comes from the heart – one's spiritual grounding and purity of intention. The true intentions of the heart, Jesus

teaches, are what can defile a person. In short, honesty, compassion and ethical behavior are more important than cultic purity laws or the traditions of the elders.

Now the story starts to get interesting. Jesus is immediately challenged to see if he has the integrity of his own convictions. In short, can he walk the walk or just talk the talk! A gentile woman approaches him and begs healing for her daughter who is tormented by a demon. He ignores her and the disciples ask him to send her away since she won't be ignored and is creating a ruckus. Jesus tells her he is only sent to help the Jews. She still won't take no for an answer and, humbling herself, kneels before him saying, "Lord, help me." Again, rather than showing compassion, Jesus again conforms to the expectations of his culture which totally distanced Jews from the Gentiles. He insults her by telling her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." That is hard to hear, isn't it? Where is the warm, fuzzy Jesus as the Good Shepherd with the lamb around his neck? Jesus is truly human and as such is conforming to the norms of the culture in which he was raised. But, again, she will not be insulted. "Yes, Lord," she replies, "yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table."

Jesus is moved by her faith and heals her daughter. But more than that happened. This woman held a mirror up to Jesus. What he saw changed him and his ministry. Jesus came to the realization that he was called to minister to all – and not just to his own kind!

Both of today's lessons are about growing and changing and the role of faith in that process. God's hand is seen in the Joseph story. But God didn't do all the work - Joseph had to respond! Joseph was sent to the school of hard knocks but he had faith God was with him and he responded by learning his lessons. In the process he

changed from a self-centered young man who was his Father's favorite in a dysfunctional family into a wise, independent and competent adult. In today's lesson he is called to learn one of the great lessons that is needed to be learned to grow into the fullness God intends for him. He is challenged to learn the compassion that leads to true reconciliation. He is challenged to recognize and accept the change that has occurred in his brother Judah and the reality that their mutual love for their father is calling them both out of past hurt into a new future.

Jesus in today's lesson is also challenged by the faith of the Canaanite woman and her loving concern for her sick child. He is being challenged by her faith in God's compassion and certainty that her child is also God's child. This forces Jesus to face his culture and to reexamine his ministry. The love of God incarnate in the living Christ cannot be limited to just some of God's children. Henceforth, Jesus' ministry and sense of mission changes.

Chase Kamakani'olumaikalani Imamoto is going to be baptized into the Body of Christ in a few moments. His parents are giving him a great gift. They are bringing him to a place where he will always be recognized as a child of God. They are bringing him to a place where he will learn the stories about faith and learn that God is always with us calling us into being the person God wants us to be. They are bringing him to a place where, with God's help, he will learn how to grow and change through faith and compassion. Listen to the prayers we will say before and following the baptism. This morning they are being said over Chase Kamakani'olumakalani. Let us remember that there were also prayed over each and every one of us. Let us listen carefully as we renew our baptismal covenant.

Amen.