

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
August 14, 2011
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Worship Theme: Bible Mysteries,

Genesis 45: 1-28, Romans 11: 1-2a, 29-32, Matthew 15: 10-28

The Bible is full of mysteries and as human beings we love to try to solve them. Like the wonderful mystery novels Chuck Box writes, today's lessons have many a twist and turn to them: And, one is not sure of the ending until the last page or sentence. Today's mysteries also have physical, political, and theological aspects to them that speak to our lives today. They may cause us to cry out, "Mercy, mercy!"

The first mystery is "Whatever happened to Joseph?" Remember, he was the 17 year-old pampered son of Jacob with the beautiful coat and the ability to dream dreams that irritated his brothers. They sold him off to the Ishmaelite traders, who then sold him to Potipher, a high official in the Egyptian courts. Not only had they sold off their brother, but lied to their father, Jacob, about Joseph having been killed by a wild animal. Talk about a dysfunctional, guilt and grief ridden family where some of the brothers probably often wondered whatever happened to Joseph?

God brought his own mysterious twist to this mess by creating a famine in the land where Joseph's father, Jacob and his brothers lived. The brothers traveled to Egypt seeking food. Unbeknownst to them at that time, Joseph, now the Minister of Agriculture, was the one from whom they had to seek help. Joseph recognized them, but they did not recognize him. Herein lay more mysteries: What would we have done if we were Joseph and had to be careful about to whom we gave food? Would we have held a grudge or would we have shown mercy and forgiveness? What would this mysterious God have us do to solve our mystery?

As we heard read from Genesis, God created some wondrous solutions to solve this mystery. God's solution was in a word—mercy. After testing his brothers to make sure they were not trying to take advantage of him again; and to be faithful to his calling as Minister of Agriculture; Joseph chose to show this mercy of God. He revealed himself to his brothers. He forgave them and fed them. He was reconciled to them. Eventually, he was joyfully reunited with his father. God's solution to solving this complex mystery was to share his mercy through Joseph with people who did not deserve it, but needed it. This is the same mercy that God extends to us today.

This same undeserved mercy from God was also needed in the first century A.D. amongst Joseph's descendants the Jews and their enemies, the Canaanites. Here we encounter an even greater mystery. As we heard in the Gospel lesson it involves Jesus and a Canaanite woman who cries out to Jesus for mercy. Mysteriously, he makes her, and those of us listening today run a maze of theological obstacles before responding in some way to her need for mercy.

But, before we join this Canaanite woman in the maze and mystery of Jesus showing mercy or not, we need to know the following: Just before this encounter with the Canaanite woman, Jesus had had a very heated argument with Jewish leaders over rules of eating. These leaders were making the Jewish faith and family

dysfunctional by their legalistic and judgmental interpretations of God's law. Jesus became very angry with these self-righteous fellows and told them off to correct them. If we have ever been in a big argument with someone, we know how we feel afterwards. We are likely to snap at the next person who asks anything of us. So it might have been with Jesus. He was God with us, yet he had a human side, too. So, I suspect he felt as we might have felt after this confrontation—not very merciful.

Worn out “from this confrontation with the Pharisees and scribes, Jesus,” and his disciples, “headed out for the far borders of Israel walking toward Gentile territory.” It was here that Jesus was suddenly approached by the Canaanite woman noisily appealing on behalf of her daughter, a victim of demon possession. The Canaanites were Old Testament enemies of the Jews. So how was Jesus, a Jew, to respond to this enemy Gentile woman in her time of need? Dr. Thomas Long writes: “This encounter between Jesus and the Canaanite woman is situated in every way ‘on the border’-on the mysterious boundary between the old and the new, between male and female, between Jew and Gentile, between friend and enemy, between the holy and the demonic.” And, to add to the mystery, was this woman sincere or was she sent by the Pharisees and scribes to trap Jesus for violating their laws against speaking to a woman in public, a Gentile Canaanite woman at that?

Matthew, by Long pg. 174

To help us solve this mystery, let us now follow this woman through a four-part theological maze. In part one, she desperately begs Jesus for mercy. “Her voice sounds like an urgent ‘scream’ or ‘shriek’ like a woman in labor pains.” Just as she yelped when her daughter was born, she now cries out again for mercy to be shown to “her demon possessed daughter. She lifts her voice in desperate hope to Jesus, whom she calls both ‘Lord’ and ‘Son of David.’” What a confession of faith! “In contrast to the Pharisees and scribes who find fault with Jesus and keep their distance, this foreign ‘enemy’ woman recognizes, in the depths of her need, that Jesus is the royal and messianic Son of David, the Lord, the Savior” and can grant her mercy.

Herein lay more mysteries. “Astonishingly, Jesus speaks not a word to her in return. His silence is stunning, deafening. At the surface level, the fact that Jesus does not respond to her initial appeal simply serves to underscore the woman's persistence when she cries out again. At the deeper level, though, this is the mysterious and fearsome silence of God spoken of by the psalmist: ‘O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer’ (Psalm 22:2). ‘Great faith’ endures not only when God's presence and help are readily available, but also in the wintry season of God's silence—a silence that Jesus himself will experience on the cross” where he cries out, “My God My God why have you forsaken me?” Matthew, by Long pg. 174

“In the second exchange, part two, the disciples urge Jesus to get rid of this bothersome, clamorous woman.” None of God's mercy is shown here. Either they are asking Jesus to simply dismiss her outright as a person with bad motives or they are asking Jesus to shut her up by giving her the healing she wants. They probably prefer the healing to shut her up. But mysteriously at this point, Jesus refuses to help her in saying: “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel” not to the Gentiles. No mercy of God is shown, yet. (Matt. 15:24), Matthew, by Long pg. 174

“It is now apparent that the woman is facing at least three obstacles in this” mysterious maze: “the silence of Jesus, the annoyance of Jesus' followers, and a definition of the mission of the Messiah that apparently includes ‘the lost sheep of the house of Israel’ but not her and her daughter.” Where is God’s mercy in this? “Under similar circumstances, most people would have retreated in dismay or disgust. However, this is a woman of ‘great faith,’” and good motive, “and she is not dissuaded. She ignores the disciples' irritation; she dares to break the silence with her renewed cry; and, what is most amazing, this Gentile responds to Jesus' Jewish Messianic identity with reverence and worship.” She then “kneels before Jesus.”

“The woman's worship of Jesus further develops the motif of her great faith and sets up the third exchange or part, in which she repeats her plea for help. Jesus finally breaks his silence toward her, but his word comes across as a harsh rebuff: ‘It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs.’ The meaning is clear: The people of Israel are the ‘children,’ Gentiles are ‘dogs,’ and what Jesus has to give is intended for the ‘children.’ Some have tried to soften the blow by pointing out that the Greek word for ‘dogs’ actually means ‘little dogs’ or ‘house dogs,’ but the sting remains. To call Gentiles ‘dogs’ was a common and well-known term of scorn.”

“What, then, are we to make of Jesus' merciless retort? Is even he sometimes blinded by nationalism and racism? Is Jesus being callously dismissive of this Gentile woman in her time of need? No, we must be careful not to apply modern standards of delicacy and politeness to the language of this passage. Despite their blunt tone, Jesus' words are, in sharp and stark terms, an expression of his true identity. By the use of the metaphor of the children and the dogs, Jesus is graphically reaffirming what he said to the disciples. He is Israel's messiah, and he has been sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. Before anything else may be said of him, this must be acknowledged. Jesus is not a generic savior, an anonymous Superman from a distant planet somewhere in space. Jesus is a Jew; indeed, he is the Jew who stands as the culmination of all of Israel's history. Jesus can be the savior of all people **only** by remaining faithful to God's chosen people Israel, and his mission to them even when they reject him.”

To help us understand Jesus' attitude in this situation: “Imagine a woman who founded and continues to manage a shelter for battered women. She has carefully defined the mission of the shelter and energetically cultivated contributions and sources of financial support for that mission. There are other agencies that serve children, the homeless, and the hungry, but this shelter is dedicated to the needs of abused women. One day, however, the woman answers a knock at the door of the shelter only to find a desperately needy man asking for food and money. No matter how much her heart goes out to this man, surely she would wonder about the propriety of taking money donated for the care of abused women and giving it to him, however worthy he may be.”

“Just so, the messiah of God, sent to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, is confronted by a Canaanite woman in need of God’s mercy. Her need is worthy, but what she wants belongs properly to the children of Israel. This woman's repeated request has brought us, then, to the turning point of the story, indeed to the turning

point of the history of God's people. What happens when the Gentiles" like you and me sincerely "knock on the door of the God of Israel? What happens when the old enemies of God's chosen people kneel before Israel's Messiah and beg for mercy?"

Everything hinges on what this woman's plea means. Does it mean Jesus should face the fact that Israel has rejected him, that he should turn his back on Israel and forget the promises of God to his people: That he should leave behind his role as the Jewish Messiah and instead become a general wonder-worker for all peoples?" Is this woman tempting Jesus to deny what God called him to do at his baptism? Jesus' reply makes it clear that he will not deviate from his mission. "However, this is not what the woman's petition means. Everything about her request demonstrates that she grasps the essential theological point: **Jesus is Lord of all because he is the promised Son of David. It is Jesus' obedience to his role as the Messiah of Israel that renders him the savior of all nations.**" If Jesus had not remained true to his calling and purpose he may not have been crucified for our sins and raised from the dead to save all humanity by God's mercy. As it turns out, the woman's plea and motives are pure.

"In the fourth exchange or part, the mystery moves to this resolution. The woman does not challenge Jesus' definition of himself or his mission. Indeed, her reply indicates that she is willing to stand **on his ground**, willing to accept his identity as Israel's Messiah, as the one sent to the lost sheep of Israel, but that she understands, in all humility, this includes her, too: 'Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.' Her humble response captures the essence of Matthew's theology: **Because Jesus is the obedient Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, he is the Savior of the whole world.** 'Yes, Lord,' the woman said, 'but even the dogs-even the Gentiles-are fed from Israel's table.' With that remark, the key turns in the lock," the mystery is solved. "'Woman,' Jesus exclaims, 'great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.' Her daughter was healed immediately." Because of this woman's tenacious faith, and clear understanding of Jesus' calling as the obedient Son of God, the Messiah of Israel, she experienced the mercy of God through him.

"This, then, is a complex mystery story about Jesus, who is Savior of all through being faithful to his calling as Messiah of Israel. It is also a mystery story about a Canaanite woman whose sincere and great faith gave her perseverance and allowed her to discern that Israel's Messiah was her Messiah, too." Like the story of Joseph, it is also about how God's mercy comes to us in complicated and mysterious ways to test the sincerity of: Our cries for mercy and our faith in him. It is also God's mercy that leads us to accept Jesus Christ for whom he really is, the Messiah of Israel. Surely, he will grant us Gentiles mercy and be our Messiah, too. All we need do is fall on our knees before him, confess him as Lord, and ask him. (Quotes from [Matthew](#) by Long, pgs. 174-177.)