

# Sermon, August 20, 2023

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:21-28

“Growing as Followers: What Do You Seek from God?”

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## Introduction

All through the summer, we've been talking about the Path of the Disciple—what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. One characteristic of a disciple is that we are always searching for God in our daily living. For the past few weeks, we've been particularly focused on being alert to God's presence in the here and now. We've talked about how we encounter God in our hunger, in the way we see ourselves as individuals and as a church, and today we're going to talk about what it is we truly want from God and how our desire shapes our direction.



## What do you want to be when you grow up?

Do you remember your answers to this question? What did you want to be?

I remember being asked this question in elementary school, middle school and high school. I always wanted to be a teacher. Except when I took a

short detour toward marine biology. But after *Jaws* came out, that desire was completely cured. I dreamt of

creating a classroom environment like my fourth grade teacher, Miss Paula Gabbard. In her classroom, we were responsible in as many ways as possible for our own learning. In her classroom, I was empowered to learn beyond the marked goal, if I wanted to. I was able to help fellow classmates, to explore new ideas, and process those ideas through writing and group discussions. We became curious learners. My year with Miss Gabbard was the best year of my young education, and I knew I wanted to help young people gain the confidence I had gained under her encouraging guidance. After Miss Gabbard, I began to pay attention to my teachers in earnest. I paid more attention to the way they chose to be present as an educator for me. I wanted to help other kids feel the way I felt in that learning environment. I wanted to create a place where kids were able to thrive in their own learning. We respected her, not because she demanded it, but because we trusted that her greatest desire was to help us learn. It was obvious to us that her desire shaped her direction.

### **Joseph and God**

Last week, in our Old Testament lesson, we left Joseph in captivity. As the favored son of Jacob, he had been cast into a pit instead of being killed by his brothers. He had been pulled out of the pit and sold into slavery and found himself in Egypt, far from home. And his brothers had deceived their father, Jacob, by showing him Joseph's blood-covered colorful coat and claiming he had died by being mauled by a wild animal.



We continue the story of Joseph and his brothers this week. When Joseph arrived in Egypt, he was bought by one of Pharaoh's officials, Potiphar. God was with Joseph and prospered him. He became a trusted right hand for his master...until his good looks were noticed by Potiphar's wife. She tried to entice him into an affair, but Joseph rejected her in order not to lose his master's trust. But as a scorned woman, Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of attempted rape. He was carried off to jail. In jail, God provided for Joseph again—granting him the favor of the jailer. Joseph was put in charge of the jail. Not long after, Joseph interpreted the dreams of the chief cupbearer and chief baker correctly. After two years, the chief cupbearer recommended to the Pharaoh that Joseph could help him interpret his dreams. Joseph wisely interprets Pharaoh's dreams for him and is appointed to lead over all of Egypt under no one but the Pharaoh himself. As he had interpreted in Pharaoh's dream, the years of abundance and famine came. The famine spread beyond Egypt and into the land of Canaan where Joseph was from.



## Joseph and His Brothers

We pick up the saga of Joseph and his brothers in the midst of the famine.

Now, remember, Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, separated him from his father and his home, and robbed him of his life of favor within their family. But, Joseph, with God's faithful help and provision, has landed on his feet and rules as governor over Egypt. His brothers are hungry. The famine has ravaged their land. So they come to Egypt, who had prepared for the famine under Joseph's guidance and by the power of the interpretation God had given Joseph, and they beg for aid. We rub our palms together as we watch the drama unfold. Be honest, now, what do you want to happen to Joseph's brothers? What do you think they deserve? Ha-ha! Joseph exacts his revenge, right? Wait, right?

Joseph's brothers were envious of Joseph's favor with their father. They wanted things to be fair, but they didn't trust God to act, so they took matters into their own hands.

And now they come before Pharaoh's governor—aka the brother they nearly killed in jealousy asking for aid. Do you suppose they were asking for fairness or mercy? What do you think would have been the *fair* thing for Joseph to do? Joseph's desire for good shaped his direction. He chose to offer mercy instead of exacting revenge.

## Canaanite Woman

Let's look at fairness and mercy from a different angle.

In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus has just admonished His disciples because they don't understand his short admonishment that it isn't what goes into someone's mouth that defiles them, but what comes out. He asks them, "Are you still so dull?" Then He goes on to say that what comes out of the mouth comes from the heart, and that's why it is our words that are defiling—because words demonstrate what is in a person's heart.

Then, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon, Phoenician cities on the shore of the Mediterranean Sea to the northwest of Galilee.

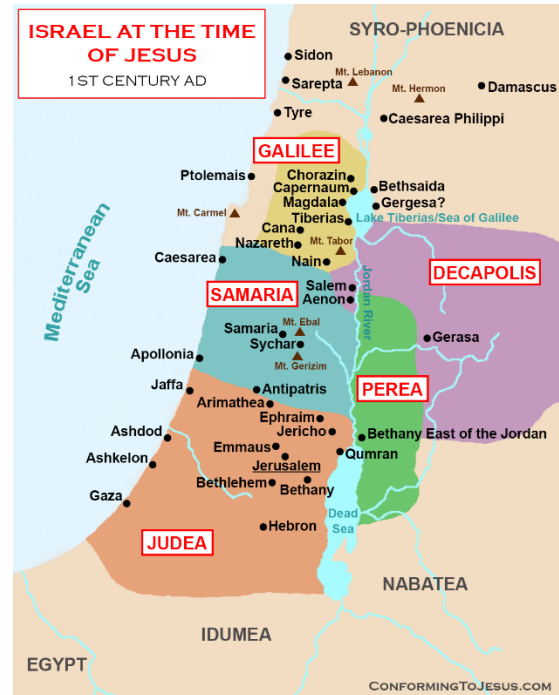
In case you're wondering why this is important, Jezebel was from Sidon. There, a Canaanite woman came to him, crying out, "Lord, Son of David...my daughter is tormented by a demon." This Gentile woman comes to Jesus and calls him "Son of David." This outsider's address to Jesus is an acknowledgement of his rightful leadership in Israel. But His disciples seem to be blind to this acknowledgement, and they tell Jesus to send her away. So, Jesus tells her that He is sent to the lost sheep of Israel and that it isn't fair to take the food of the people

he's been sent to feed and throw it to people who are no more than dogs. But the woman, rather than taking offense to his insult, persists in begging him for help. Her daughter is the one for whom she's asking mercy. She puts her own pride aside and persists in begging for mercy, saying that even the dogs eat crumbs from their masters' table. She's not opposed to receiving even the leftovers of his ministry—so long as her daughter is healed—and she believes that even the leftovers of Jesus' healing are enough to heal her daughter, so she persists in begging for mercy. And Jesus acknowledges the depth of her faith and heals her daughter in that moment.

I wonder how this story would play out in our setting today...

Imagine Jesus somewhere outside the four walls of the church—any church. Imagine a non-church-goer coming to Jesus and begging him to heal someone within that outsider's circle of influence. Of course, the disciples tell Jesus to send her away. And Jesus says to the outsider, "I've come to reclaim the lost sheep of Israel. It isn't fair for me to take the food of the children I've been sent to feed and throw it to dogs." The person responds, "But even dogs eat crumbs from their masters' table."

Where can we locate ourselves in this story? Who is the outsider in this story today? Think about that for a minute.



What do we want from God?

Fairness or mercy?

I think back on my life, and though I am now a fully-committed follower of Christ, I have not always understood what full commitment to a life of faith means. Nor have I always understood exactly how God decided that God



wants me to have the gift of God's grace. I have not always understood—and am often amazed that the grace I have received is not a grace I have done anything—or even could do anything to deserve. I have received mercy not because I deserve it, but because God wants it for me. And though I do my best to follow in the way that Jesus led His disciples, I fail. I stumble. I fall. I want to walk in love as Jesus walked in love. My desire for love shapes my direction. So, in all of my failures, stumbling and falling, I have come to the conclusion that I really don't want fairness from God. What I truly want is mercy. Mercy is what I seek from God for myself.

When it comes to “the outsiders,” or people who don't look like me, live like me, behave like me, have the same opportunities I have had, or have the same dreams as I do...what do I desire for them? Do I want fairness or mercy for them?

I found myself face to face with this question this week as I walked my dog in the rain and encountered a person on our church steps sleeping—waiting out the storm. I approached under the cover of my umbrella. He was seeking refuge from the rain. And in that moment, I got it. Fairness or mercy?

What about the person who has been incarcerated, has served their time and is released, but unable to find someone to hire her? Fairness or mercy?

What about the person who was prescribed opioids by their physician and is now suffering in addiction? Fairness or mercy?

The person who is addicted to alcohol born of parents who were addicted to alcohol? Fairness or mercy? The person who suffers from mental illness due to genetics, environment, trauma, or pain? Fairness or mercy?

Those born into poverty? Fairness or mercy?

God created the universe and all that is in it. God told humanity to be *fruitful*, not destructive. Fairness or mercy?

What is it *truly* that we seek from God? What would we *deserve* if we received fair treatment?

Deep breath...there is good news. Fairness or mercy is a question we are to continue to wrestle with just as Jacob did at the Jabbok river. Just as grace that has been given to us through Jesus Christ.

The one who poured himself out for people who were already dead, and yet to be born. The one who poured himself out for those who put him on that cross. The one who poured himself out because he knew that he was made by love for the purpose of love.



As Jesus told his disciples, it isn't the food that we eat that defiles us. It is the words that come out of our mouths. It is how we act toward others that does—for how we treat others says everything about what's inside our hearts. The good news is that God's love reaches beyond our desire for fairness. And instead of what is fair, God has given us God's divine mercy. In Christ, we receive grace upon grace. This is the good news. We thought we wanted fairness, but God loved us so much God gave us mercy instead. Thanks be to God. Amen.