

## **“Crossing Borders”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
August 20, 2023 - Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 15

[Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:10-28](#)

There is a crisis at the border. People have been streaming in from afar, desperately seeking better lives for their families and themselves. They would, of course, prefer to remain in the familiar land of their birth, but life there had become impossible. There is not enough food, not enough safety, not enough of a prospect for anything resembling a decent life, and so they come to the border seeking help.

Years ago, Joseph, a wise governor of Egypt, foresaw that the masses would come streaming there seeking help because life for many in the region would be made difficult or impossible because of several years of famine. And so for years Joseph oversaw a campaign to grow enough crops that there would be excess grain to store away to feed not only his own people but for their neighbors as well for several years.

So, desperately seeking food in a time of famine, people living in lands outside of Egypt had been traveling there to find some relief in their time of crisis.

Crossing the border from the land of Canaan in the north came the sons of Israel, most of them anyway. For one of them, Israel’s favorite son Joseph, had been thrown into a pit by his brothers and then sold into slavery by them many years prior. Unbeknownst to his brothers, Joseph had risen from being a slave in the land of Egypt to becoming its wise, grain-growing governor. And it was to their now unrecognized, slave-turned-ruler brother that these sons of Israel came during their time of crisis, bowing before him and seeking his help.

And that is where the story of today’s lesson from Genesis 45 begins. As we heard, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. But instead of compounding their crisis by offering payback for their past crime, Joseph offered them mercy, moved by compassion rather than vengeance. Joseph recognized in that moment that God had worked through his own difficult journey and that it was only because of his brothers’ earlier dastardly deed that he was now in a position, in a time of famine, to bless with sustained life the people of Egypt, their neighbors, and now

his own family. By graciously welcoming and not cursing his brothers, Joseph crossed a border himself, from behaving in the common way of people to behaving in a better, more heavenly way of offering to those who definitely did not deserve it kindness and mercy.

In our second reading from the gospel of Matthew, we heard another story about borders and border crossings. In this lesson, Jesus teaches the crowds and his disciples about what is to be excluded from the boundaries of life of a child of God and what it to be included in it. In particular, he teaches that it is not so much by carefully following their practice of avoiding certain unkosher foods or engaging in ritual hand-washing that people are kept safely inside the bounds of the God-blessed life, but it is by keeping out evil that harms others in acts such as such as murder, adultery, theft, and speaking slanderously, that people live within the bounds.

And we heard that after teaching these lessons, Jesus went toward the district of Tyre and Sidon, crossing borders into Gentile country, where there were many unclean hands involved in consuming much unkosher food. And as he traveled, one who would have been considered to be the uncleanest of the unclean, a woman identified as a being a Canaanite, and so a child of the ancient enemies of Israel, came to him, desperately seeking help for her spiritually-tormented daughter. After not answering her at first, she persisted in seeking help, so he explained that his mission was to serve the children of Israel. And still persisting in seeking his help, he then said that serving her would be like taking the children's food and giving it to instead to the dogs. While shocking for us to hear, Gentiles were commonly disparaged by Palestinian Jews of his day as dogs, and so Jesus was speaking inside the bounds of his cultural norms, and yet it seems to be a harsh reply that was less than consistent with Jesus' own teachings about acting and speaking mercifully. Still, the Canaanite woman persisted in seeking help, and Jesus at last, moved by the outsider's great faith, healed her daughter.

I believe that Jesus also, as he acted outside the bounds by healing a Gentile, may have sensed something changing inside of himself as well. Perhaps through this encounter he grew as a person, that his worldview expanded, seeing that the outsiders were just as worthy of God's grace and mercy as the insiders. And, while his own mission to seek and save the wandering sheep of the flock of Israel

remained unchanged, we know that at the end of this gospel, the resurrected Christ's final command to his disciples was for them to cross borders, to go out and serve *all* nations or Gentiles.

These two Bible readings about crossing boundaries teach us about living as God intends, and not limiting ourselves by living only in the ways of our ancestors or in the ways of the people around us now. These stories teach us that God's grace and mercy are indeed for all people, even those we consider to be outsiders or enemies as well as for those who have actually caused us harm. And we are taught that we are capable of changing, growing as people and in our own calling to bear God's grace and mercy and to share these gifts with others, no matter who they are, whom they love, or where they are on life's journey.

We are to be mindful practitioners of mercy always. We are to strive to create a more merciful society, in which none are treated as being less worthy or unworthy of receiving our respect. We are to look upon those in need outside of our borders or at our borders with compassion, seeing them not as pests or parasites, but as people, fellow beloved children of God, worthy of our kindness.

So let us be merciful, let us be kind, let us have hearts undefiled by harming others. And as we seek to bless others and not curse them, may we be blessed. Amen.