

**Sermon**  
**Proper 15, Year A**  
**August 10, 2008**  
*by The Rev. Norman Bray*

"Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in us the fire of your love."

This Sunday marks the halfway point in the season of Pentecost and it is also the last reading that we will hear from the first book of Moses, commonly called Genesis. It is also a day with some very thought provoking, even disturbing readings. The Old Testament reading and the Gospel reading should have you all scratching your heads, figuratively at least, because both Joseph and Jesus exhibit some behavior that is not what we might expect from two heroic figures but I believe that there are at least a couple of very important lessons in here that we all might take away with us, some lesson that might stretch us a little bit in our respective theologies.

When we left Joseph last week he had been thrown into a pit, narrowly avoided being killed, and then finally sold to some Midianites or Ishmaelites, it is impossible to tell which, and all of this at the hands of his brothers. Now, I will grant you that jealousy is a powerful emotion but this does seem to be extreme. We know that Joseph was his father's favorite and that he had a beautiful coat as a testimony to that and I am sure that he wore it whenever he had the chance and that could not have helped his relations with his brothers. We also know that Joseph had dreams that he interpreted to mean that his brothers would all bow down before him. I don't think that having those dreams or even interpreting those dreams would have been a problem if only he had kept all of that to himself, but he did not. He shared all of that information with his brothers and I can see where that could get tiresome. He also turned out to be a tattletale, carrying his father bad reports about his brothers. You know, when you think about it, I don't think that I would have wanted him around me either. I cannot find much to recommend this young man, but I don't think that I would have sold him. However his brothers did, and after several adventures and after interpreting some dreams for the Pharaoh in Egypt, Joseph finds himself in charge of everything. I mean that, everything. Joseph was the boss of Egypt, answerable only to Pharaoh.

Joseph got this job by interpreting a dream for the Pharaoh that predicted 7 years of good crops followed by 7 years of famine and then telling Pharaoh how to deal with the situation by building storehouses and putting away one fifth of the harvest during the seven good years and then using that stored grain to get through the famine. Joseph got the job and he became the steward of the resources of all of Egypt and he took a *tithe* of all that Egypt produced for seven years. Can you tell where this is going now? It is that time of year when we talk about stewardship and I can think of no better example than Joseph. I may not have

liked him as a young man but he was an excellent steward and an excellent example for all of us. We are called to put away a portion of what we receive from God to provide for us in the future, what some people call our retirement. We are called to put some of our wealth aside to provide for emergencies such as an illness or repairs to our homes. We are called to put some of our wealth aside to provide rest and refreshment for ourselves, maybe even a vacation, and we are also called to give back to God from what God has given us to provide for the needs of the Church, both this congregation here and the larger, capital "C" Church of all the Christians in the world. You are good stewards here, you must be or else St. Luke's would not be 170 years old, and last year you responded when the stewardship committee called you to make a pledge. Your vestry has been a good steward, managing the expenditures of the church so that right now our expenses are much less than we had expected and our income is more than we expected. The church is in a good financial condition and so now we can begin to look outside of ourselves and see how we can help those less fortunate than ourselves, we can begin to work on outreach, but we cannot so that unless we continue to exercise good stewardship and that always begins with the individual and in the family.

But back to Joseph. When we pick up today's story he is talking to his brothers and he breaks down and cries and tells them who he is and tells them to bring their whole family down to the land of Goshen so that he, Joseph, can take care of them. That is a nice story isn't it? But you didn't get to hear how Joseph tormented his brothers with questions and by keeping Simeon as a slave while they went home to tell their father that if they did not return with Benjamin then they would never see Simeon again. Joseph was cruel to his brothers and you may say that he had a right to repay them for selling him into slavery but I still don't care much for the man. However he does say something that needs to be examined. He says that "God sent me before you to preserve life." God sent me, or something that I hear frequently "everything happens for a reason." Have you ever heard that? Do you say that yourselves? Don't answer out loud because I have to tell you that I cannot live with that thinking. That kind of thinking makes God a puppet master, moving us around to suit God's own plans, no matter what kind of pain or grief we encounter and I cannot think of God in that way. God created us to share in all of God's good but we decided to go our own way and that way is usually away from God, contrary to what God intended for us. We cannot have it both ways. We cannot follow our own wills until something bad happens and then say "Well, God must have needed something else." Now, if we say that God can use all things for good, that is a very different matter and that is what happened in the story of Joseph and his brothers. His brothers did an incredibly evil thing by selling their brother into slavery but I can never say that God intended for that to happen because that would mean that God caused Joseph's brothers to sin, and that can't happen. God is good, all the time, and God can use any and all of us to accomplish God's purposes, and God does just that.

We have an example of that in today's Gospel. Jesus has gone to Canaan, we do not know why. It is the land of the pagans, people that the Jews have hated for at least 1,500

years. They hate them enough that when they speak of them they call them “dogs.” Jesus has gone to this foreign land and we do not hear of him sitting at a well or entering a house, all we hear is that this Canaanite woman comes out and begins to shout at Jesus “Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon.” Now, this woman, who cannot have seen Jesus, he’s never been here before, calls him as her Messiah, as the Son of God, right out of the blue, and Jesus ignores her. Make no mistake about this, Jesus hears her and ignores her and when the apostles ask him to say something so that she would stop shouting Jesus responds “I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.” Jesus refuses to heal her daughter. Do you recall any other occasions when Jesus refuses to heal someone who asks for healing? I can’t recall any such occasion but here, in this foreign land, Jesus refuses because he says that God has sent him to the house of Israel. Jesus is doing what he is sure is God’s will but God has a surprise in store for Jesus because this woman kneels down in front of him and says “Lord, help me.” Jesus doesn’t know it but he has already lost this battle. He still has to make his very rude remark about throwing food to dogs but the woman gets the best of Jesus and he has to acknowledge that her faith is way too much for him to resist. Think about that, her faith has to be strong enough to overcome Jesus’ understanding of his own mission in this world and believe that her daughter can be healed. Jesus had no intention of healing anyone in this foreign land but God used this woman’s faith to teach Jesus that human beings cannot build fences to keep the power of God to ourselves. Our God is the God who cares for all, not just the chosen few and our God is the one who can use us to accomplish God’s purposes even when we have other plans.

God is good, all the time.

Amen