

Knox Uniting Church Cluster

Sunday August 16th 2026 – (Year A. Pentecost +12)

Sermon (reflection) by Russell Croxford at Rowville Uniting Church

Bible passages: Genesis 45:3-11 and Matthew 15:17-28 (NRSVUE)

“Justice starts in the heart”

PREAMBLE (early introduction to theme)

Both of the bible passages we will look at today from Genesis and Matthew say something about the condition of our hearts and the way that condition will determine our actions towards others. When Joseph reunited with his brothers who had once tried to kill him, he could have taken revenge, since he now had the power to do so. But over the years he had nurtured his heart in faith and was thus able to respond with forgiveness, mercy and generosity. In our Matthew passage, Jesus taught that our actions will indeed reflect what's in our hearts and in today's encounter with a foreign woman Jesus himself has to dig deep into his own heart to respond in mercy to a person who has been rejected by Jesus' own people. Let's explore how these stories speak to us and challenge us today.

MESSAGE

There's an old moral lesson going around which goes something like this: You are holding a cup of coffee when someone comes along and bumps you, making you spill coffee everywhere. Why did you spill the coffee? 'Well because someone bumped into me, of course!', you say. But that's the wrong answer. You spilled the coffee because coffee was in the cup. If tea had been it, you would have spilled tea. Whatever is inside the cup is what will come out. Therefore, when life comes along and shakes you (which will happen), whatever is inside of you will come out. So we have to ask ourselves, what's in my cup? When life gets tough, what spills out? Joy, gratefulness, peace and humility? Or anger, bitterness, harsh words and actions? The moral lesson is to fill our cups with gratitude, forgiveness, joy, words of affirmation to yourself and others, kindness, gentleness, and love! ¹

In today's reading from Matthew, Jesus says basically the same thing, albeit in a different way. What makes us 'clean or unclean' ('nice or nasty people' in my words!), he says, has nothing to do with external, ceremonial, religious things, like what food we eat or the handwashing ritual. It has everything to do with what's in your heart. How you treat others - be it with justice or injustice, depends on your heart. True justice starts in the heart.

The trouble is that our hearts are never completely pure. There are always mixed motives going on in our hearts. Let's hope and pray that the *dominant* thing in our hearts is the love of Christ and that this love of Christ will be the *dominant* thing that comes out of us towards others. May the response of justice always overcome the response of injustice!

It would appear from our Genesis reading that the dominant thing in the heart of Joseph was the love and grace of God, evidenced by what came out of his heart when the going got tough. It enabled him to show mercy and forgiveness to his brothers who once hated him and tried to kill him, as we read about last Sunday (Gen 37). What was in his heart enabled him to be a man of integrity and justice.

But Joseph was far from perfect, like every other big name in the bible it would seem. Even when his brothers came grovelling back to him, when he was now ruler of Egypt, begging for food, since there was famine back in Canaan where Jacob their father live, Joseph did not immediately forgive them. Instead, he manipulated them. He kind of 'played with' their sense of fear and remorse, for a while. (See Gen ch 42-44). That wasn't very nice.

¹ This adapted version of the story was found on the Pilgrim Uniting Resource website

He didn't even reveal who he was, at first to his brothers who didn't recognise him after so many years and after such a change in his status. But eventually he did 'break', as in today's account, and there is an emotional outpouring of his heart towards them. Thankfully, it's a kind of happy ending. He extended justice to them, when he could have easily done a big injustice in return for the injustice they had done to him.

What was in Joseph's heart is what flowed out to his brothers – even if there was a bit of an inner wrestle going on in the process. I reckon we can all relate to that inner wrestle.

I'd like to suggest today that even Jesus went through that inner wrestle at times – perhaps never so intensely as in today's story. Jesus has just declared that it's the state of one's heart that will determine our actions of justice or injustice to others. And immediately he is thrust into a predicament which will test his own ability to 'practice what he preaches'.

A Canaanite woman comes begging Jesus to heal her daughter. As a Canaanite living in that vicinity, she was an outsider, a Gentile, a non-Jew. Canaanites were hated by the Jews. Jesus knew that and knew he was sent to the Jews first. That was his earthly mission and priority. So what was he to do? It was an inner wrestle. Would he react as we would expect and want from him, and respond with justice towards this outsider and heal her daughter?

In what is one of the most disturbing and confusing responses of Jesus in all the gospels, he appears to act with a great injustice toward her. Firstly, he ignores her (v23). He then reminds her he was not sent to outsiders like her (v24). Finally, he rebuffs her request with what looks like a heartless reference to her being like the dogs wanting the bread that belongs only to the children at the table (i.e. the children of Israel) (v26). It's pretty harsh.

It's tempting to sanitise Jesus' response here and explain it away to keep his perfect character intact. I think a more honest approach is to actually remain unhappy with his actions here. It's more realistic. I think it helps to see that the human Jesus did wrestle with his thoughts. It's like he was having a battle between what he knew in his head, and what he felt in his heart – like we do. The fact that he didn't send the woman away straight away, as the disciples demanded (v23) suggests he was in a real quandary.

The other thing which is okay to accept is that Jesus changed his thinking. Something happened in his heart – a change that was triggered by the incredible faith that this outsider demonstrated. The result of this change within Jesus was the justice of healing and the resulting freedom from what was tormenting a young girl.

We feel the tension and drama in this story, don't we? Perhaps the whole idea of this story is to make us uncomfortable about our attitudes to anyone who is an 'outsider'. Perhaps the key idea is that outsiders are equally deserving of God's blessings, and they often show greater faith than the 'insiders' (cf Jesus rebuking his disciples for having 'little faith' – Mt 14:31). But sometimes, in our own thinking and rationalising, we shut out the possibilities of seeing outsiders in a different way.

What is Jesus' own experience here modelling? For Matthew's community, which was strongly Jewish, there was surely a lesson here that the mission of Jesus, whilst beginning in the 'House of Israel', must never stop there. It must continue to reach all people, as Matthew's gospel does emphasize in other places, culminating in the 'great commission' of Jesus to "make disciples of all nations" (28:19).

What it's modelling for us, I believe, is to be continually filling our hearts with God's love and compassion, and thus continually expressing that love and compassion in acts of justice to others. And, like Jesus to always be prepared to move beyond the limitations and constraints of what our minds are telling us and allow our hearts to reach out in mercy and grace – to let 'what's in our cups' spill out in love.