

“THE OLD SWITCHEROO; OR, MERCY AND THE LEAST”

A Sermon for the Third Sunday in Lent, March 19, 2017

Text: John 4:4-5-42

Something marvelous happens in the story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. But it's nothing new.

By now, you have been around the gospel long enough to recognize the divine dynamic of mercy in any story where God's blessing is bestowed not where it is to be expected, but where God chooses.

We beg; it's who we are. God is merciful; it's who God is. Our God's identifying characteristic is mercy.

When Jesus met a woman at the well in Samaria, God bestowed mercy upon the one person in that village who could have least expected God's blessing. A woman who lived with the unceasing contempt of her neighbors. The lowest person in town. Because, as Jesus pointed out, she had had five husbands, and the one she had now was not her own.

But here came the Son of God to lift her up and bless her.

Tale as old as time, tune as old as song: Mercy and "The Least."

This incident took place just after Jesus became notorious in Judea for baptizing more people than John the Baptist. (Although it was not Jesus himself who was baptizing, but his disciples.) Jesus didn't like that kind of talk, so he left Judea and went back to Galilee. (According to John 4:1-3)

The stage was set for Jesus to attack the way people drive wedges between people. Even between John and himself!

He came to a place, Sychar, better known as Shechem, which stood as a symbol of division among God's children. Not all of God's children considered

Jerusalem the center of their faith; Samaritans worshiped in Shechem instead. That was a terrible rift, among the people who shared so much in common and should have been friends.

Since Jesus and the woman bring up Jacob (AKA Israel) and his son Joseph and his sons, I want to share with you a story about them which could have been in the back of Jesus' mind the whole time he was talking with the woman. She was asserting the preeminence of her heritage against the supremacy of Jerusalem, which she thought Jesus represented.

Genesis 48:9-20 9 Joseph said to his father, "They are my sons, whom God has given me here." And he said, "Bring them to me, please, that I may bless them." 10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, and he could not see well. So Joseph brought them near him; and he kissed them and embraced them. 11 Israel said to Joseph, "I did not expect to see your face; and here God has let me see your children also." 12 Then Joseph removed them from his father's knees, and he bowed himself with his face to the earth. 13 Joseph took them both, Ephraim in his right hand toward Israel's left, and Manasseh in his left hand toward Israel's right, and brought them near him. 14 But Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands, for Manasseh was the firstborn. 15 He blessed Joseph, and said, "The God before whom my ancestors Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been my shepherd all my life to this day, 16 the angel who has redeemed me from all harm, bless the boys; and in them let my name be perpetuated, and the name of my ancestors Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude on the earth." 17 ¶ When Joseph saw that

his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. 18 Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." 19 But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations." 20 So he blessed them that day, saying, "By you Israel will invoke blessings, saying, 'God make you like Ephraim and like Manasseh.'" So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.

Tale as old as time, tune as old as song: Mercy and "The Least."

That tale, that tune, runs right through Scripture, from beginning to end. And the heart of it, the "moral of the story," is that God's gifts are for God to give, not for us to deserve or demand. Every time someone arrogates to himself the right to privilege or land or inheritance, God stands ready to undercut that privilege by blessing the least, instead of the greatest.

That is the song of Mary, of course. ("He has lifted up the lowly." But it is also the tune Jesus sings, who said "The first shall be last; and the last first." "Go into the highways and byways and compel strangers and poor people to come in; for those who were invited shall not taste the feast." And "the least in the kingdom of God is greater than the greatest man born of woman.")

In the parable of the Prodigal Son it was the younger son, repentant, who received what his older brother could not receive because he was so full of his own deserving. And it was the second man in another parable, in the temple, the one who asked for God's mercy upon his sinful self, who went home justified—not the man who proudly enumerated his good deeds.

Tale as old as time, tune as old as song: Mercy and "The Least."

Our begging hands, mounted on these walls, represent to God that we recognize our status. Our empty hands speak this message this tune as old as song: "Kyrie, eleison." Lord, have mercy.

Israel/Jacob crossed his hands to bless the lesser son, rather than bestow the blessing where it was deserved and expected. He might have been thinking about how he himself had received the blessing which belonged to his older brother Esau. But the point of the switcheroo is the same: someone got what they did not deserve, because of the blessing of the one who held all things in his hand.

In Sychar that day, Jesus worked the mercy magic upon a village, not as revenge upon the village gossips, but in order to reveal to all of them that the mercy of God was on the march, and was available to the lowliest, the least—even Samaritans, who so often felt they were receiving only the lefthand blessing. But they listened to the lowliest person in their midst, and very soon they, too, received the blessing which comes (traditionally) with the right hand.

People fought with Jesus more about this than any other thing: He did not believe in giving people their due. He believed in, he exemplified, he embodied the mercy of God. If we remember that, it will be a little less painful for us to remember that we are beggars.

Amen.