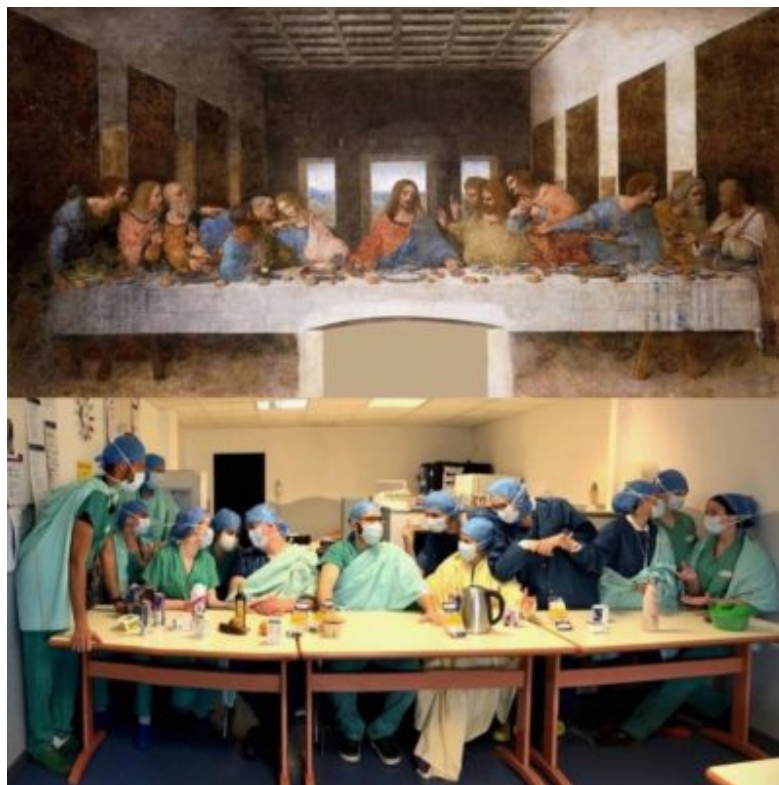


# “Seeing the Mercy of God” by Brenda Seat



*Top, Leonardo da Vinci's The Last Supper, 1495-98. Bottom, doctors at a hospital in Paris performing a tableau vivant of the painting.*

**August 16, 2020**

## **Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost**

I have read the story of Joseph probably a hundred times, but this time something really stood out for me. At the very end of the scripture lesson for this Sunday, after Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and they cry and hug each other the scripture says, “and then he and his brothers talked.”

Now wouldn't that have been an interesting conversation to have overheard? Imagine all the catching up they would have

had to do! Who had gotten married, how many children they all had, Israel's health, and of course about that **little** incident when they sold Joseph into slavery.

Joseph was betrayed by his brothers. For most of his life he was in danger, imprisoned and used abominably before he was finally noticed and his gifts recognized. Isolated and alone, Joseph must have had many bitter thoughts against his brothers. In the chapters proceeding our scripture for today, Joseph tests his brothers, putting gold and jewels in their sacks, sending them home to get Benjamin and then trying to keep Benjamin hostage. And then in this chapter something changes and he decides to forgive his brothers. So what changed his heart and mind? What was it that made him decide to reveal himself to his brothers? What made him decide to be merciful?

In our Gospel lesson we have a Canaanite woman who approaches Jesus and asks his help in healing her daughter. Jesus clearly is not interested in helping this woman who is not of his people, not of his tribe. She was an outsider, and she had the gall to ask him to help.

What changed Jesus' mind? What made him decide to help her – to be merciful?

Cynthia Bourgeault in her book, ***Mystical Hope***, defines mercy as “an infallible link of love.” “The mercy of God,” she says, “does not come and go, granted to some and refused to others. Why? Because it is unconditional – always there, underlying everything. It is literally the force that holds everything in existence, the gravitational field in which we live and move and have our being” (p.25). (Let me read that again....) I find I need to do that with Bourgeault's writings, a lot!

Our Epistle reading is one of those complicated Paulisms that makes everyone “hate” Paul and his letters. But when you dissect it a bit you can see how he, too, sees mercy as that

infallible link of love.

Persuaded by Paul, the early church was allowing non-Jewish people to join and become followers of Jesus. Inevitably arguments broke out about whether the fact that non-Jews were allowed in meant that God had somehow revoked God's special favor on the Jewish nation.

Paul's answer is of course not! And then he gets a bit tricky. He says because the Jews rejected Christ, a way opened up for Gentiles too to be a part of the movement, widening the circle and opening the doors to a broader, more inclusive understanding of Christ's love. And maybe, he says, when the Jews see how Gentiles are attracted to this Good News, then they will also become curious and want to join as well.

I know...it is a bit convoluted, but Paul was a lawyer, and clever arguments were his way of opening up the unknowable nature and love of this Mercy. For Paul, Mercy is at the core of this circular relationship. God does not abandon God's chosen people, but instead allows more people to choose into God's love and in doing so God's love draws in even those who once rejected it. This infallible, unconditional link of love, the mercy of God, draws in all of us, weaving us into a bigger, more beautiful whole.

When we look back at the Gospel lesson, the Canaanite woman seems to have known and understood Paul's argument even before he made it! She comes to Jesus and says help me, and he says, "No, you aren't the right kind of person...I wasn't sent to help your kind."

I think these might be some of the most unkind words in the Bible, especially since they come from the mouth of Jesus. But this gutsy, persistent, smart, argumentative, "nasty" woman takes that hit and lobs one back saying, "Even the dogs are entitled to scraps." To his credit, Jesus, in that moment sees the vision she sees. That God's infallible, unconditional

love, the Mercy, is not a scarce resource given only to a few but rather is abundantly available to everyone. Indeed, as Jesus said, her vision, her faith that there was enough for her and her daughter, made it so and her daughter was healed.

When we go back to the story of Joseph in the light of this understanding of Mercy, we begin to see something shift. Notice how in the first verse Joseph tells his attendants to leave, and no longer able to control his emotions he weeps so loudly that his Egyptian attendants heard him outside the closed doors and reported it to the Pharaoh. Then Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and begins to tell them how he now sees God's presence in every step of his life.

God was active and present down in the pit with him while he was waiting to be sold.

God was active and present when he was a servant in a foreign household in a foreign land. God was active and present while he was in a foreign prison.

God was active and present in the royal court of Pharaoh.

This is a remarkable and transformative understanding for Joseph. And it is notable in two major ways:

First, it went against the common understanding at that time that gods held sway only in limited geographic locations. Yet, Joseph sees the God of Abraham's active presence even in places far from where Abraham's God was supposed to be.

Secondly, it is remarkable because Joseph never had a direct encounter with God, like Abraham, Sarah, Isaac or even his father, Jacob. For this reason, Joseph's story is notable among the patriarchs of Israel in that he followed God without having had a direct experience or encounter with God. Yet his understanding of God's active presence, that infallible unconditional Love, the mercy of God, seems to have been more transformative and more profound than any of those direct

encounters experienced by his ancestors. When he can see God's presence in the very worst moments of his life, he is overcome with emotion and it transforms the way he sees and understands what happened to him and he is able to forgive his brothers.

So can we see the mercy of God, active and present today?

It seems to me that the pandemic has stripped away a lot of the fog of unconsciousness and denial that we used to live with. There is a clarity of vision now that seems unimaginable pre-pandemic. I feel that in some ways we are "*Living on the Border of the Holy*," which is the title of a book by William Countryman, another mystic like Bourgeault. He describes the borderland like this (p.8):

*[A]t privileged moments of access, we find ourselves looking over from the everyday world into another, into a world that undergirds the everyday world, limits it, defines it, gives it coherence and meaning and drives it.*

In the border country one discovers connections, roots, limits, *meaning*. To live there for a while is like having veils pulled away. In the long run we find that the border country is in fact the place we have always lived, but it is seen in a new and clearer light.

Like you, because of the pandemic I have seen new visions of equality and justice. Like you, I have seen new visions of people being cared for rather than being exploited. Like you, I yearn for those visions to come into being.

I went to visit my dad a few weeks ago. As you know, I have been struggling with how to relate to my dad since he became a Trump supporter. Although my dad has always been a conservative evangelical, it has been very difficult for me and my sister to reconcile the man we knew, who taught us that Love, with a capital L, was everything and who loved God, his family and the Japanese people fiercely, with the man who now

supports Trump. I must confess that it has been difficult for me to visit him, and in some ways I was grateful to the pandemic which put a stop to meeting in person for a while. But when the retirement home where he lives began allowing families to come visit again, I went.

We sat outside under the pergola and talked about family and other things. Our topics for conversation are a bit limited these days. But then out of the blue he said, "Our church is going to have a series of conversations about racism and I am going to go and be a part of them." Surprised, I asked why that had become a topic for the church to talk about. And he told me this story.

There is a family in his church who adopted two young sisters from Guatemala. My dad, who loves kids, had connected with both of these girls, especially the older girl, Hannah, who is now a 'tween, loves *anime* and keeps telling my dad she wants him to teach her Japanese. He said that almost every Sunday, the girls come and sit with him during worship. One day, the father of the two girls was doing some business in town. In the line where he was standing a man began talking with him and started spewing all kinds of racist hatred. The father, after hearing this, got out his wallet, opened it up and showed the man the picture of his family and said, "These are my daughters." The racist man angrily left the store. Shaken by the encounter, the father shared that incident with the pastor and the church and asked that the church conduct a series on racism in America, which they agreed to do.

Who knew that a small church in rural Pennsylvania, where my dad, a Trump supporter, attends, would be working on issues of racism in America? God's mercy, God's infallible unconditional love is at work. And in me as well. Because I have been thinking and saying the very same unkind words Jesus said to the Canaanite woman, about my dad and – let's be real – about many others, too. As I wrote this sermon, I realized how limited, how scarce I thought God's mercy was. How, like

Joseph, I need to be able to see and appreciate the vast, undeniable, ongoing,

active presence of God, who loves all of us and draws all of us to God's self. Like the Canaanite woman, I need to see beyond the boundaries of my time and place and see the vision of that greater unity of God's unconditional, infallible Love – the gravitational field in which we live and move.

Let it be so!

Amen.