

Sunday, August 14, 2011: Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-20, 21-28

## **As God's people, we are the remnants and promise of new life.**

by [Emlyn A. Ott](#) in the [August 9, 2011](#) issue

My grandmother was from a part of the world that no longer exists. As an immigrant to the U.S. between two wars, she saw people raped and murdered and towns plundered. Until she died she continued to express strong feelings about people and places—feelings that seemed only bizarre and paranoid to me, her young granddaughter. When I began to want to know more about her life, I realized that no traditional research would unearth the facts about her hometown, her birth or her baptism—the records had disappeared in a blaze of ethnic obliteration.

How was my grandmother able to live with her memories and also continue to hope and love? Hope and love she did for 84 years, with her strong political opinions, a tendency to fuss and mispronounce English words, a love of music and dancing, an inordinate fear for my father's safety and success, and an amazing capacity to create beautiful things out of bits and pieces of fabric. I spent many weekends in my room in her home, with a picture of Jesus at my bedside and a portrait of three angels above the bed. The dresser drawers were filled with remnants of fabric that she had collected. I loved to touch the pieces of cloth and imagine what she would create with them. When she died, it was the fabric that I remembered. The sight. The smell. The touch. The possibilities.

Matthew's Gospel reflects a world that was changing. Boundaries were shifting; people were afraid. Matthew's community needed to offer the gospel to a larger world and to people whom these early Christians had considered beyond the scope of their mission. Rules were changing too. Chapter 15 tells a frank story about how difficult it is to reach across deeply engrained differences. Polarization is built into us: good and bad, us and them. "Love God and love your neighbor as yourself" is a corrective to the tendency to draw closer within the lines of "our kind." Circles of affiliation give us identity, but they can be as blinding as they are solidifying. The

woman of Canaan provides a model of what it is like to see beyond our immediate worldview. Here Jesus is not kind and open; he turns her down. The woman is not fazed even by her own prejudice. She confesses and proclaims. She asks for mercy, acknowledging that Jesus has no justification for dealing with her. She acknowledges who he is: Lord, Son of David. She passes a relationship checkpoint, entering into his world in the hope that he will see her in a different way. She does not give in or give up until Jesus responds and heals her.

What might it mean to be able to see the message of Jesus as something not bound by history, lineage or past understandings? What might God be turning upside down for our sake today? Can we as communities of faith be clear about who we are? Can we see with new eyes what God might be requiring of us? Scientists have a name for our tendency to see only what we have experienced before; they call it "operational blindness." As parents, political leaders, teenagers, faith communities and leaders, we often appear just as focused on one route as the racehorses that are lining up at a starting line.

Like the Canaanite women, each of us engages in confession and proclamation. How do we move more effectively from belief to action and make our discipleship more vital? Ronald Heifetz of the Harvard Kennedy School of Government uses images that are helpful for the human plight of what could be called "functional blindness." Heifetz talks about engagement in relationships as a "dance." The need to stay connected to the dance is profound. All of us dance, whether we think we can or not. Heifetz challenges each dancer to take a breather on the balcony once in a while as a discipline. We need to take time to observe, and to acknowledge that there is truth in the bigger picture. This rhythm of dance and observation will expand our worldviews and allow disciples to be able to engage in developing their own presence—a place between the inner life of faith and the outer life of living into the world.

In *Deep Change: Discovering the Leader Within*, Robert Quinn describes the ability to "travel naked into the land of uncertainty" and "building a bridge as we travel on it." As Christians, we must take risks and think in ways never imagined. What does it take for us to cross physical, mental or spiritual boundary lines for political, economic or spiritual reasons? What does it take for a mother, desperately seeking healing for a child, to face down cultural taboos and cry, "I believe!" and "I know that you, Jesus, are the source of this healing"? What is our boundary challenge today? Can we clarify what we believe in order to see God in the midst of seismic, tectonic

shifts of our ecosystem, our political systems and our religious life?

Paul reveals that just as his story is a sign of God's constancy, so future followers will be examples of that grace. As God's people, we are the remnants and promise of new life. As communities of God's people, we carry the remembrance of God's love and gifts into the world. Our callings and gifts as disciples are never in question. God's love is irrevocable, and it goes with us as we explore a new road in hope and in love.