

Grace That Will Not Be Fenced In
Genesis 45:1–15 and Matthew 15:(10–20) 21–28
Sunday, August 16, 2026

By Roxie Wetterau

Introduction

Every family has its fault lines. Every community has its borders. We may not draw them on a map, but we draw them all the same. Lines between who belongs and who doesn't, who gets trusted and who gets watched, who's "one of us" and who isn't. Sometimes those lines run straight through the middle of a family. Sometimes they run between nations, or religions, or just between "people like us" and everybody else.

Both of our readings today are about a line being crossed. One is a line inside a family—a line drawn by betrayal so deep it should have been permanent. The other is a line between peoples—a line drawn by centuries of history and reinforced, that day, by the disciples standing right beside Jesus. And in both stories, the line doesn't hold. Something gets through it. I want to spend our time this morning looking at what gets through, and why, because I think it tells us something essential about who God is and how grace actually moves in the world.

The Brother Who Should Not Forgive

I have a confession to make about the story of Joseph. I first came to this story through a stage door. Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice introduced me to Genesis long before I ever read it. The musical "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat" has been sharing this tale with audiences since 1968, in every conceivable style from country and western to calypso. Now, as some of you know, I can't sing a note, so you would never have found me in the cast, but I've worked on productions from the technical side, and I've seen it more times than I can count, in community theater, professional, the whole range. And yes, I had the original cast recording on cassette, which dates me considerably. And I wore it out. Literally wore the tape out.

Here's the thing about that show: for all its campiness and its parade of pop styles, it earns its emotional climax every single time. The moment Joseph reveals himself to his brothers lands in every production, regardless of how delightfully silly the preceding act has been. People who couldn't tell you a thing about Genesis walk out of that theater having felt something true. There's a reason this particular story has that kind of staying power. So let's look at why.

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Let's start in Egypt, in a room full of grain and full of fear.

Joseph is standing in front of his brothers, and they have no idea who he is. The last time they saw him, he was seventeen, thrown into a pit, sold to traders, and, as far as they were concerned, gone for good. They had lied to their father. They had let Jacob believe his favorite son was dead, torn apart by wild animals. Twenty years had passed. They had built their lives on top of that lie, the way people do, hoping enough time would bury it for good. And now here is a man who could destroy them. He is second only to Pharaoh in all of Egypt. He holds the grain that stands between their families and starvation. He has every reason...every legal, moral, and emotional right...to let them rot in their guilt, or worse. Instead, Joseph weeps. He sends the attendants out of the room, because what he's about to say isn't for an audience. And he says: *I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.*

I want you to notice that Joseph doesn't pretend it didn't happen. He doesn't say, "Let's not talk about the past." He names it plainly: *you sold me*. This is not a man with amnesia, generously forgetting an inconvenient history. This is a man who remembers everything and chooses, with his eyes wide open, not to let that history be the last word.

And then he says something remarkable. He tells his brothers not to be distressed or angry with themselves, because—and here's the theological heart of the whole passage—*it was not you who sent me here, but God*. God sent me ahead of you, Joseph says, to preserve life, so that there would be survivors in the land.

Now, we need to be careful here, because this line gets misused. Joseph is not saying his brothers' cruelty was good, or that God wanted them to do it, or that evil doesn't really count as evil if something good eventually comes from it. The book of Genesis doesn't let us off that hook. What he's saying is something more mysterious and more hopeful than that: that human sin does not get the final say over what God is doing in the world. The brothers acted in jealousy and cruelty. That's true. And God was at work underneath, around, and through that cruelty, weaving a future they could never have engineered on their own. Both things are true at once. That's providence...not God causing the evil, but God refusing to be defeated by it.

And here's something easy to miss: the line Joseph crosses isn't only a family line. Look at what he says he's been doing with his position in Egypt. Not just keeping his own family alive, but keeping grain in store for an entire region in famine. Egyptians. Foreigners. People

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who were never part of the promise made to Abraham. Joseph, the Hebrew slave turned Egyptian official, becomes a source of life for people who have no blood claim on him at all. The boundary-crossing that happens at this family reunion was already happening, quietly, in the storehouses of Egypt. God's reach was never going to stop at the edges of one family, or one people.

The Woman Who Would Not Take No for an Answer

Which brings us to Matthew, several centuries later, and a very different kind of boundary. Right before our Gospel reading, Jesus has been arguing with the Pharisees about purity. They're upset because his disciples haven't washed their hands the proper, ritual way before eating. And Jesus says something that must have sounded almost reckless: it's not what goes into your mouth that makes you unclean. It's what comes out of your heart. Evil intentions, he says, not unwashed hands, are what truly defile a person.

It's a striking move. Jesus takes the whole architecture of "clean and unclean," the entire system of who's in and who's out based on visible, external categories, and relocates the real issue to the heart. And then, almost immediately, Matthew shows us what that looks like in practice.

Jesus withdraws into the region of Tyre and Sidon. Gentile territory, outside the boundaries of Israel. And a woman comes to him. Matthew doesn't soften it: she's a Canaanite. Of all the ethnic categories available to a Jewish audience, "Canaanite" carries the oldest, deepest history of conflict and division. She is, by every external measure the disciples would have used, exactly the kind of person who does not belong in this conversation. A Gentile. A woman. From the wrong region, with the wrong history.

And she will not stop shouting. *Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me. My daughter is suffering.* The disciples want her gone. Not cruelly, necessarily, just efficiently, the way we want a problem to go away so we can get on with what we were doing. And Jesus, at first, seems to agree with the boundary: *I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.* She doesn't leave. She kneels in front of him and asks again. And Jesus says the hardest line in the whole story, something like: it isn't right to take the bread meant for the children and throw it to the dogs.

I won't pretend that line is comfortable. I think we're allowed to sit in that discomfort rather than explain it away too quickly. But watch what the woman does with it. She doesn't argue

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that the metaphor is wrong. She takes it and turns it inside out: *Yes, Lord—but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table.*

She isn't asking Jesus to throw out the system. She's pointing out that even within it, even at the very edges of it, there is more mercy available than anyone has accounted for. Even the leftovers of God's grace are enough for her daughter's healing.

I want to pause here as someone who thinks in terms of scenes and scripts. Notice what Matthew is doing in this moment dramatically. This woman has been handed an argument — *you don't belong at this table* — and in a single sentence she takes it, turns it inside out, and hands it back. In any play, that is the moment the audience leans forward. That is when the power in the room shifts. And Matthew knows it. He doesn't soften it or rush past it. He lets the line sit there, and then he lets Jesus respond to it. The best line in this scene belongs to the outsider. That is not an accident. That is the whole point.

And Jesus says (the only time in Matthew's Gospel he says this to anyone) *Woman, great is your faith.* Not the disciples, who have been with him the whole time. Not the religious leaders, who know the scriptures by heart. A Canaanite woman, shouting from outside the boundary, gets the commendation no one else receives. And her daughter is healed in that very moment.

Do you see the connection back to those earlier verses? Jesus said true defilement isn't about external categories; it's about the heart. And then a woman with every external mark of "outsider" shows up with a heart so full of faith and love for her daughter that Jesus himself calls it *great*. The old boundary lines—clean and unclean, Israelite and Gentile, who's in the room and who's shouting from outside it—turn out not to be where God's mercy stops after all.

What These Two Stories Are Telling Us Together

So here we have a brother who chooses reconciliation over the justice he was owed, and a mother who refuses to accept exclusion when her daughter's life is at stake. Different centuries, different continents, different kinds of boundaries. But the same God moving underneath both stories, the same pattern: a boundary that looked permanent, and grace finding its way through anyway.

I don't think it's an accident that these texts come to us together. Because most of us know both kinds of boundaries from the inside. Some of us carry the Joseph story in our own families: a relationship fractured by something that was never supposed to be forgivable, a

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silence that's lasted years, a wound someone caused that still has a name and a face. And some of us carry the Canaanite woman's story too, in the form of categories we've absorbed without ever choosing them: about who really belongs at this table, in this church, in this country, in this conversation, and who is, politely or not, expected to stay at the edges.

Here is the good news underneath both readings: God does not treat our boundaries as sacred. Not the ones drawn by old betrayals, and not the ones drawn by old prejudices. Joseph had every right to hold the line of justice against his brothers, and he laid it down. Jesus's own disciples wanted to hold the line of "who we're here for," and a mother's faith pushed it open. In both cases, the line that gets crossed isn't crossed by ignoring what's real. The brothers really did wrong; the history between Israel and the nations was really there. But by a mercy that refuses to let those real things be the final word.

So What Do We Do with This?

I'd ask you to consider two things this week.

First: is there a line in your own life that you've assumed is permanent—a relationship, a grudge, a "we don't talk about that"—that might actually be the very place God wants to do something like what happened in that room in Egypt? Joseph didn't pretend the wound wasn't real. He just refused to let it be the last chapter.

Second: where have you absorbed a boundary about who belongs—at this table, in this church, in God's mercy—that you didn't actually choose, that you just inherited? The Canaanite woman didn't ask Jesus to discard the categories. She asked for the crumbs. And found out the table was bigger than anyone had told her.

When we gather around this table, in whatever form our worship takes that day, we are practicing the truth both of these stories point to: that the meal is not only for the people who were always assumed to be invited. There is bread enough, mercy enough, room enough. For the brother who betrayed and the brother who was betrayed, for the daughter of the covenant and the daughter from outside it, for every fault line we have ever quietly assumed was permanent.

The boundaries we draw are real to us. They are not, it turns out, the boundaries of God's mercy. Thanks be to God for grace that will not be fenced in.

Amen.