

The Purpose of the Church: Forgiveness, Freedom & Training to live in Kingdom Community

7 Epiphany C

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First Reading: Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Many years after being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers, Joseph reveals himself to them. Now the second-in-command in Egypt, Joseph reassures his brothers that God has used their evil intentions for good to preserve life during a devastating famine, & Joseph forgives them.

³Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. ⁴Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” & they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵& now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; & there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, & to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, & lord of all his house & ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry & go up to my father & say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, & you shall be near me, you & your children & your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, & all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you & your household, & all that you have, will not come to poverty.’” ¹⁵& Joseph kissed all his brothers & wept upon them; & after that his brothers talked with him.

Gospel: Luke 6:27-38

Jesus continues to address a crowd of his disciples. He invites his followers to shower radical love, blessing, forgiveness, generosity, & trust even on enemies & outsiders. Living in harmony with God’s intent brings the reward of overflowing blessing.

[Jesus said:] ²⁷“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; & from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰Give to everyone who begs from you; & if anyone

takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹Do to others as you would have them do to you. ³²“If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵But love your enemies, do good, & lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, & you will be children of the Most High, who is kind to the ungrateful & the wicked. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷“Do not judge, & you will not be judged; do not condemn, & you will not be condemned. Forgive, & you will be forgiven; ³⁸give, & it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

Introduction

Mercy. Mercy. Mercy. Joseph lives it in Egypt. Jesus preaches it in the gospel. The Spirit guides us into merciful lives with the power of forgiveness to reconcile what is fractured & divided. Such merciful living is the baptismal blessing of having put on Christ. It is the gift of the life-giving Spirit. It is a reflection of God’s glory revealed in Christ.

Overview

The promise & its fulfillment may not look at all alike, even though they are intimately connected. Joseph’s brothers never thought they would see him alive again, so how shocking he must have appeared to them as an Egyptian leader! Jesus invites us to sow seeds of new life by loving enemies.

Current Event

Restorative justice programs seek to bring victims & perpetrators into conversation with one another to repair harm caused by the perpetrator’s behavior. Restorative justice conversations may take place between two individuals or within entire communities, with the goal of bringing about true reconciliation & transformation. Forgiveness & healing take different forms after harm has been done, & sometimes face-to-face conversations are simply not possible. As people of God, we are called to the messy work of reconciliation. Check out the work of [Restorative Justice on the Rise](#) to learn about restorative justice resources in your region.

[Luke 6:27-38](#)

Luke's Sermon on the Plain urges a radical ethical generosity & extraordinary patterns of forgiveness, in the hope that believers replicate the attitudes of Jesus. Matthew's Sermon on the Mount &, perhaps ten years later, Luke's Sermon on the Plain provide somewhat different versions of their common source. For example, Matthew's "Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (5:48) is in Luke "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful" (6:36). Recall that Luke's account of the crucifixion (23:34), not Matthew's, includes Jesus forgiving the soldiers. The rhetoric of 6:38 demonstrates what a masterful writer Luke was. The forgiveness from God that Luke stresses in his gospel has implications: we are to forgive others. Followers of Jesus are called into extraordinary ethics, not merely towards general goodness. The stark radicalism of these passages—love your enemies, offer the other cheek, give to everyone who begs, do not judge—has inspired some saints, such as Francis, & some movements, such as Christian pacifism, to adopt exceptional lifestyles that challenge the more ordinary life lived by most of us. Now Jesus interprets his teachings to potential followers ("you that listen") in radical terms. He speaks to those now hated: bring before God ("bless", "pray for", v. [28](#)) those who persecute you, & offer no resistance to anyone who deprives you of your most basic possessions, "your coat" (v. [29](#)) & "your shirt". Reciprocating the love & loving actions already shown & taken by others is basic human behavior (the cultural norm) & so does not warrant God's notice ("credit", vv. [32-33](#)). Even lending when you expect to be repaid is not enough (v. [34](#)); rather love others by doing for them as you would wish they would do for you (v. [31](#), the Golden Rule), even when you are fairly sure they will do nothing for you ("enemies", v. [35](#)). In doing so, you will be doing as God does; he gives even to those who reject his love ("ungrateful", grace-less) & work against him ("wicked"), without expecting recompense. Further, abstain from critical attitudes to others, "forgive" (v. [37](#)) those indebted to you, & "give" (v. [38](#)) freely.

[Genesis 45:3-11, 15](#)

Genesis 37–50, a distinct literary unit, narrates the Joseph saga. Preserved by both the J & E traditions, the story resembles Wisdom literature by honoring a wise man who serves God faithfully. The picture of life & customs in Egypt during the Hyksos period (1720–1550 bce) is accurate, although the historicity of the Joseph saga is debated. This passage begins the reconciliation among the brothers & for the first time in the story articulates a theology of divine care. For the believing monotheist, even the

evil of the brothers & the decision of the Pharaoh are seen as effected by God. According to the Genesis narrative, Joseph is aided toward forgiving his brothers because he trusts that God had directed everything for the greater good. However, for many Christians, it is difficult to see the h& of God underneath the power of evil. Thus this story might be helpful to some contemporary believers, but to others not. Over the centuries Christians have seen Joseph as a picture of Christ, who forgives everyone, even those who crucified him, & through whom God saves the people from certain death. Joseph has risen to power in Egypt. There is a famine in much of the Middle East, & Jacob (Israel) has sent ten of his sons to buy grain, but has kept Benjamin, son of his first wife & full brother of Joseph, at home. When they seek to buy grain, they are accused of spying; as surety that they will return with Benjamin, they must leave Simeon behind in Egypt. To lose Benjamin would break Jacob's heart, (with Joseph gone, only Benjamin can inherit) but the old man agrees to his heir joining his brothers on the second trek to Egypt. When they depart for home with the grain, Joseph has them arrested for stealing: he has had his silver cup placed in Benjamin's pack, where it is found, so Benjamin is detained. Judah pleads for Benjamin's release, saying that he expects Jacob to die if Benjamin fails to return home. & here our reading begins. Joseph can no longer hide himself from his brothers. He dismisses his courtiers, to be alone with his family: this is a personal affair. He identifies himself (v. [3](#)) & then (vv. [5-8](#)) explains the theology behind what has happened to him: God has worked through his brothers. By selling him into slavery, he says, "God sent me before you to preserve life." God acts in history, through special people. It is Joseph's management of Egypt's grain stores that will keep Jacob's family (clan) alive through the famine. Israel, "a remnant on earth" (v. [7](#)) will survive. God has even made Joseph "a father to Pharaoh" (v. [8](#)), vizier or prime minister. In v. [9](#), Joseph shows that he is eager to see his father again: "... do not delay". He offers them land in "Goshen" (v. [10](#)), the fertile area east of the Nile delta. There they will be "near" (v. [10](#)) him: this & other clues in this chapter place the story in time: the royal court was in lower Egypt during two periods; the Hyksos period (1720-1550 BC) fits this & other data in the story. Joseph forgives his brothers (v. [15](#)).

Images in the Readings

The phrase "**turn your other cheek**" has come into the English language from these passages in Luke & Matthew. Amish Christians are among those who famously try to live by this mandate, for example, by refusing to sue anyone in court. The Christian kerygma proclaims that Christ was victorious in spite of submitting to evil, & it is such forbearance to which Christians are called. Biblical stories & oracles use **famine** as an

image for human loss & death & food as God's gift of life to the world. In some stories, God sends famine as punishment. Here, God saves the people from famine, albeit in a surprising manner. World climate change suggests that famine will be an increasing disastrous condition in places already marked by poverty.

Comments from the Cloud of Witnesses

Probably no admonition of Jesus has been more difficult to follow than the command to "love your enemies." Some men have sincerely felt that its actual practice is not possible. Others, like the philosopher Nietzsche, contend that Jesus' exhortation to love one's enemies is testimony to the fact that the Christian ethic is designed for the weak & the cowardly, & not for the strong & courageous. Jesus, they say, was an impractical idealist. But upheaval after upheaval has reminded us that modern man is traveling along a road called hate, in a journey that will bring us to destruction & damnation. Far from being the pious injunction of a utopian dreamer, the command to love one's enemy is an absolute necessity for our survival. Our responsibility as Christians is to discover the meaning of this command & seek passionately to live it out in our daily lives. —*Martin Luther King Jr.* [Martin Luther King Jr., *Strength to Love*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), 47-48.]

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Principles from the Text

- i. **Honesty:** Like Joseph/Jesus, Be honest w/ yourself about the pain/injury/anguish you have experienced. Being aware of it, experiencing it **DOES NOT MEAN NURTURING/CULTIVATING IT!** Sharing to process it, YES; harboring & marinating in it to help it grow, NO.
- ii. **Receive/Remind yourself of the Promises of Healing from God:** FIRST, seek to connect with this. Remember how healing will come. It may take time yet it will come. **DO NOT** seek to demand this or deceive yourself that you will receive this from the one whom you perceive has hurt/pinched you. Lean into this promise of healing and wholeness again from God and mediated through God's people and community – measured out to us likely through people who love us. This is what brings release to you from the pain, disappointment and all that is negative directed to the one whom you perceived caused the pain in the first place. The perpetrator may never understand.
- iii. **Choose to act in a way that Jesus has shown you;** forgive, release from debt or responsibility, think about from their point of view – re: their guilt, do

that which might regain a connection with them – if not at the level before then what is the highest level possible; this may only be an acquaintance – but you will have a true relationship going forward not burdened by unmet expectations. Learn from this and if needed adjust the relationship going forward.

- IV. ***The Church is to be the practice place for how to live in this way.*** A primary purpose of church is to learn/experience the freedom this kind of forgiveness gives, to practice receiving and granting this forgiveness, to practice building this kind of community and relationships and to know that God makes it all possible by Grace not command or threat. This starts in your Family of Origin in a Christian home and is especially lived out in the church community including and especially how the church interacts with the world.