

**Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
(7th Sunday in Ordinary Time)**

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; Luke 6:27-38; I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50.

Genesis 45:3-15 is the denouement of the Joseph account, the event that brings that story to both its apex and psychological conclusion! In this story, Joseph reveals to his brothers that this man with whom they have been dealing over their last several trips to Egypt and whom they perceive as being the second most powerful man in Egypt and the king's primary advisor ("father to Pharaoh") is, in reality, their brother Joseph. More than twenty years earlier, they had sold Joseph into slavery to some traders and had no idea what had happened to him, but assumed that he was either a slave somewhere or dead. Now they discover that he is the vizier of Egypt! The shock would even be greater to Jacob who believed that his son was dead! But now the brothers discover that this mighty ruler is indeed the brother they betrayed and sold into slavery. How they must have trembled at the news!

There are three notable moments in this story. The first is Joseph's inquiry – almost a longing inquiry – about his father. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" (vs. 3) The Hebrew is particularly poignant. This is no intellectual question. There is an urgency, a sense of great hope, but also the fear that the news will be bad that permeates this question. "Is my father alive? Please – please don't tell me that he is dead! I want to see my father again!" It is almost as if this great ruler, seated in the glory of the Egyptian court and upon a throne, is a little boy all over again, hoping against hope that his father will still be alive! It is such a poignant moment in the story!

Of course, the news is good. His father is indeed alive, and is in the best of health for a person of his advanced years. What relief must have flowed through Joseph. He would get to see his daddy again!

The second notable moment is Joseph's interpretation of his sale into slavery. He had once been the brash boy who offended his father and alienated his brothers with his description of dreams of them bowing down to him as their superior. Now he had become the emotionally and spiritually mature person who could both freely forgive his brothers for what they had done and see the hand of God in it for a greater good. "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves," Joseph said to his brothers, "because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt" (vss. 5-8).

Joseph puts the matter even more precisely later on when he states, "Even though you intended it to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (50:20). It was petty jealousy and anger that prompted the brothers to do what they did. But there was a far greater plan of God's in which God was acting even through petty jealousy to save Jacob's family, the Hebrew clan, the Egyptian people, and all the tribes of the mid-East from a famine that would otherwise have destroyed them all. "All things work together for good to those who love God, who are called

according to his purpose” (Rom. 8:28). But all things worked together, in this case, not only for all those who loved (or even knew) Yahweh, but for an entire populace of many nations, whomever they might have worshipped.

This did not excuse either the sin of Joseph’s brothers in putting their jealousy into action or of Joseph’s naiveté in sharing this dream. Joseph had already paid for his lack of judgment through his slavery and imprisonment, and he had grown in maturity as a result. And his brothers had seen the grief they had brought upon their father, and the trouble they brought upon themselves in their negotiations with this strange Egyptian overlord with whom they were forced to deal. And their responsible action in regards to their youngest brother Benjamin exhibited to Joseph that they had more than learned their lesson because of the pain they had created by their actions regarding Joseph. There was room aplenty for repentance on all their parts.

But, nonetheless, the primary truth with which Joseph was dealing in this account was the recognition that God overrules even evil intentions and uses such foolishness to the higher good of all. A people have been saved, a region rescued from famine, and Joseph’s family restored to him because God took the most evil intentions and used it for good!

The principle lying behind the story and its primary truth is one of the essential principles of belief in the sovereignty of God. That principle is that God achieves God’s *intentions* through both human and divine *action*, not human *motives*. That is, God has created and continues to create intentions for this world, molding a world according to God’s design. In this specific instance, that intention included the well-being of all the peoples of the near East during what would be a devastating famine. Further, God uses human beings as integral parts of the accomplishing of that plan, and does so through their actions. Thus, it was God’s intentions to accomplish the objective of saving the peoples of the near East from starvation through the intervention of Joseph as vizier of Egypt, organizing food production and distribution.

Even further, God used the animosity and jealousy of Joseph’s brothers to capture him and to sell him into slavery so that eventually, he would arrive in Egypt, be sold to a master who would eventually jail him so that he could be discovered by Pharaoh and exalted to his position as vizier. It is not necessary, in God’s use of the actions of humans, for those actions to be motivated by pure motives. They can be motivated by the most evil of intentions. Thus, in the Joseph account, the brothers were motivated by jealousy and hatred, and acted only to hurt Joseph and to remove him from them (even the impact this would have on their father wasn’t of sufficient consequence for them to be diverted from their action). But God was finally concerned with the action, not the motive. The principle, therefore, is that God uses human action despite its motives, in order to bring about God’s intentions.

The third notable moment of this story was the expectation of the reunion that would happen when Joseph’s father and the larger clan joined Israel’s sons in Egypt. “You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here”. Thus it was that the clan of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob moved into the richest area of Egypt, the delta area named Goshen, and were welcomed there by the Pharaoh himself. And Joseph was reunited with his entire family once again!

Psalm 37 is a length poem – 40 verses. Particularly its opening verses (1-11) are full of meat and can't be quickly exegeted. The entire psalm deals essentially with patience and trust, but it is how it develops that exploration that is particularly noteworthy. It begins:

“Do not fret because of the wicked; do not be envious of wrongdoers, for they will soon fade like the grass, and wither like the green herb. Trust in the Lord, and do good; so you will live in the land, and enjoy security. Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart” (37:1-4).

It is intriguing that the Psalmist instructs us not to “fret” or “be envious” of wicked people. The assumption is that they seem to be doing well, and it is easy for us to become resentful when we see how well they live. It seems unjust. But the Psalmist says “do not fret”. Do not let yourself become agitated over this apparent injustice. Such agitation does you no good!

Then the Psalmist does a unique thing. He shifts the reader's focus. Take your attention off the rich and powerful, he in essence states. Stop comparing yourself to them. Instead, focus on God. Center on God; trust him; take delight in him. And when you do that, two things will happen. First, you will find meaning and purpose in a life directed toward serving (“do good”). Second, you will find “the desires of your heart” – that is, your deepest spiritual and service desires – gaining the ascendancy in your life, so that those measurements which you used to compare yourself to the rich and powerful will slowly fade away, and you'll find that the deepest desires of your heart (that is, relationship with God and the community of service and faith) will be met!

Psalm 37 continues as a rich resource on patience and trust. Verses 5-7 state, “Commit your way to the Lord; trust in him, and he will act. He will make your vindication shine like the light, and the justice of your cause like the noonday. Be still before the Lord, and wait patiently for him; do not fret over those who prosper in their way, over those who carry out evil devices” (37:5-7).

The Psalmist is really dealing with a life centered in God. He calls upon us to commit our way to the Lord and to trust in him. But what is being suggested is not either a peaceful or a quiet life, worshipping God in the Temple. The person centered in God is to be moving out of a commitment to justice. “He will make . . . the justice of your cause (shine) like the noonday”. The truly spiritual person, the Psalmist is teaching, is not one who simply lives a contemplative life but a centered life. It is a life centered in justice precisely because (and fueled by) it is a life centered in the “shalom” of God!

Further on in the Psalm, the author writes, “Better is a little that the righteous person has than the abundance of many wicked” (37:16).

There are other “goods” in life than possessions, the author is suggesting. And the highest good is righteousness – that is, one who is living in a right relationship with God which is manifested in a just relationship with the neighbor. To have great economic abundance and an impoverished relationship with God is to be truly poor, because “the Lord upholds the righteous” (37:17b).

The psalm continues, “Our steps are made firm by the Lord, when he delights in our way; though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, for the Lord holds us by the hand. I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are ever giving liberally and lending, and their children become a blessing. Depart from evil, and do good; so you shall abide forever. For the Lord loves justice; he will not forsake his faithful ones. The righteous shall be kept safe forever, but the children of the wicked shall be cut off. The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever” (37:23-29).

Then the Psalmist concludes, “The salvation of the righteous is from the Lord; he is their refuge in the time of trouble. The Lord helps them and rescues them; he rescues them from the wicked, and saves them, because they take refuge in him” (37:39-40).

The primary message of these portions of the psalm – and of the psalm itself – is that God is faithful. As the African-American response puts it “God is good – all the time!” I particularly love the confession, “I have been young, and now am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken” (vs. 25a). God isn’t going to let his faithful ones down. The Psalmist’ whole life is a testimony of that reality – both in his own “living of his days” and his observation of the lives of others whose purpose is to glorify God. He is not saying that they will not have troubles nor will be exempt from dark days. But it is that the Lord “will see them through”. “I have come thus far by grace” is the old African-American saying. And it is a powerful testimony – that God will see us through. I, too, “have been young and now am old” and I would witness to the reality that I have never experienced myself as forsaken once I was found by God, no matter how much life might have tumbled in on me. He has been faithful. And that gives me hope and joy and shalom!

Luke 6:27-38 continues Jesus’ “Sermon on the Plain” (6:17). It is similar to Matthew’s “Sermon on the Mount” but is much abbreviated.

Jesus declares, “But I say to you that listen, love your enemies; do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you” (vss. 27-31).

Jesus is here presenting life as it should be lived in the kingdom of God. If one were to take seriously Jesus’ call to the Jubilee community, what would that actually look like? Here Jesus describes how people living under shalom should treat one another. What he is proposing is clearly radical, because one person living this way would stun the world that would come into contact with him or her. By so living, it would call people to embrace comparable values for themselves. Thus, such a living out of one’s faith would be “radical” because it would strike the very core of life.

How, then, shall we live? Jesus declares that God’s Jubilee people act out their faith in three ways. First, they love their enemies (vv. 27b, 32, 35a); they do good (vv. 27c-29, 33, 35a). And they are to live a life that is oriented toward giving and blessing others (vv. 30, 34, 35a).

First, they love their enemies. Jesus first commands “his” people to live lives of love, not just toward their family or friends, but specifically toward their enemies (vss. 27, 35). “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them” (vs. 32). Jesus is doing more here than simply suggesting that we attempt to care for and about those who are normally in an adversarial relationship with us. He is going much further than that. He is stating that one can’t authentically contribute to the building of the shalom community unless he is loving across classes (or making it relevant to today, religions and nations). The “enemy”, as contemporaries of Jesus would see it, would primarily be those in another class than themselves who (according to your class) would likely be taking advantage of you or you of them. Thus, Jesus is saying, “Expendables, love the aristocracy, but hate their policies that lead to you being forced into expendability. You who hold power, love the peasants and the expendables and do good to them, rather than exploiting them. And peasants, love both the expendables and the powerful, even while being filled with rage for the injustice being done by one Jew to another!”

Second, Jesus requires that his followers “do good”. “Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strike you on the cheek, offer the other also. If you only do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. Do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked”

It is the most extraordinary advice. The way to stop the escalation of hatred, alienation and the eventual collapse of society is to begin acting in an entirely irrational way. Take proactive steps of doing good to those who would seek to take advantage of you. Be a blessing to those who want to curse you. “Pray for those who abuse you”. The way to conquer evil is not by retaliation, but by being compassionate and caring for the very one who would seek to exploit or oppress you. Jesus is proposing radical counter-cultural action on the part of his followers that will de-construct each situation in which they are involved, will leave their “enemy” confused and thoroughly flummoxed, and will hopefully get them to begin reconsidering their actions. It is civil disobedience at its most radical!

Third, Jesus commands that his followers are to live lives committed toward giving to and blessing others. “Give to everyone who begs from you, and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. If 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. But love your enemies”. Jesus’ radical perspective continues. Living in the shalom community (the Kingdom of God) is to live life as one who blesses others. Your actions are to be highly intentional; even when another acts in a way that seeks to hurt or devastate you, your task is to love them back – to bless them. If one does that consistently and continuously for a long enough period, it will finally begin to have a profound redeeming impact upon the “enemy”. The way to overthrow an oppressive and exploitive order is not to try to meet “fire with fire”. The way to overthrow it is to outlove, outgive and outbless it. And that will create such cognitive dissonance within that system that it will finally be overcome by such love and will ultimately yield. The most revolutionary act is not the rebellious act but the transformational act.

Jesus summarizes what he is contending in the most profound way. “Do to others as you would have them do to you” (vs. 31). This “Golden Rule” should not be too quickly dismissed. Here is how to change your world. Treat others the way you wish to be treated yourself.

It is very important not to see this passage as being one of reciprocity. Jesus is not saying, “Deal with others lovingly, giving and blessing them. If you do this long enough, they will inevitably start treating you that way.” Treated with love, your class and position “enemies” may respond to your love and start treating you lovingly. But they may not, as well. They may just keep on perceiving your loving action as weakness or resignation, and go right on oppressing you. So this action is not a tactic on your part designed to get a comparable response.

No, you should treat them this way because it is best for you. Treating others this way breaks the cycle of retaliation. It frees you from the chains of hatred, oppression and abuse. If they can’t get a response of rage and retaliation from you, then, in a profound sense, you have won. And deep inside, they know you have won. You have been the better man or woman for it. And most important, “your reward will be great, for you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked” (vs. 35b). Therefore, if there is any hint of reciprocity in your action, it is not reciprocity from your enemy (although that, indeed, may occur). It is reciprocity from God. You have demonstrated your imitation of Christ, and God has rejoiced in this, your transformation. “Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful” (vs. 36).

Jesus thus concludes this reflection, “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and 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” (vss. 37-38). It is not, Jesus is saying, that if you don’t judge, condemn and live in resentment, then your “enemy” (even if they are the elite) will no longer judge, condemn and resent you. They may well continue in their present course. But that is their problem, not yours; and they have to deal with “your Father in heaven” over their own commitment to oppress, exploit and control. But if you choose no longer to judge and condemn, and instead live your life forgiving and giving, then God will be delighted with the way you are choosing to act and he will bless you.

But God will not bless you by giving back to you what you gave away to others. No, God will go much further than that. Using the imagery of the marketplace, Jesus shows God heaping blessings upon those who truly seek to live out the Jubilee kingdom. God will not only pour full your sack “of life” with grain; he will “press it down (to make as much room in the sack as possible for the most grain), shake it (to get out all the air lying between the kernels) until your “life-sack” will be “running over”. You can’t outgive God – for the living of your life by kingdom standards, and in the face of all the ruthlessness, exploitation and domination of the whole world around you, will bring the greatest blessing to you from God who will be immensely delighted in you, his “beloved”!

I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50. When does eternal life begin for the Christian? It begins, not with one’s death but with one’s re-birth, with one’s response to the embrace of God in Christ. When does God’s kingdom come? It doesn’t begin with God’s intervention in human history at

Jesus' coming again; it begins when Christians decide to stop reacting to the oppression, exploitation and control of the "principalities and powers" of the world and start becoming proactive in kingdom ways (see today's Gospel lesson). When does the transformation of the world into God's shalom community begin? It begins when people like Joseph (today's Old Testament lesson) or the Psalmist (today's Psalm) break the cycle of revenge by beginning to interpret in healing and transformative ways the events that happen to them rather than casting blame, so that what one meant for the other's harm becomes God's good. That is the essence of Paul in today's Epistle lesson.

The principle of the resurrection of society and of life is captured in Paul's astounding words, "What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And as for what you sow, you do not sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen" (I Cor. 15:36-38). It is as if Paul is returning us to Jesus' famed words, "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24).

God is in the transformation business! God is always at work in society to make it into what it is not. Whether we are talking about individuals or about groups of people or about the political, economic and religious systems of society, God is always at work within them, through them and sometimes in spite of them to bring about transformation. As Paul, speaking of the resurrection of the body, puts it so dramatically in today's Epistle lesson, "What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a physical body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a physical body, there is also a spiritual body" (vss. 42-44).

So, whether we are talking about a person living out her days here on earth or whether we are talking about those who have gone before us who are now a part of "that great cloud of witnesses" cheering us on (Heb. 12:1-2), whether we are talking about those who are ground down by the powers of this world or the Powers of another world, whether we are talking about political, economic and religious systems that gravitate toward domination or the people who are seduced by those systems to give them their allegiance, God is the great pro-actor, never reacting but always acting in us, through us and in spite of us in order to bring about his intentions for that world he has so lovingly created.

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