

Sermon – God of Life
Scripture – Genesis 45:1-11,15, Luke 6:27-38
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Today's first scripture reading from Genesis 45 is the culminating passage of Joseph's story, Jacob's favorite son who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and who rose as a leader in Egypt to provide relief during a time of famine. Scholars have observed how different in character Joseph's story is from the other stories of patriarchs. One cannot help but notice the absence of God as a central figure. God does not appear as a visitor at meal time, does not talk directly to people, and does not control the direction of events through supernatural intervention. Yet, when Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers and provides a theological interpretation of their earlier betrayal, one realizes that Joseph understands God has been present all along...at work to bring good out of evil, to bring life out of death—and to use Joseph's life to save the lives of many including his own family. Hear now the Word of God.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph 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. ⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ 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. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all Pharaoh's house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' ... ¹⁵ And Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. Amen.

The gospel reading for today, Luke 6:27-38, continues Jesus' Sermon on the Plain which parallels the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Jesus asks his followers the impossible, to "love their enemies," and then suggests that this means doing good to, blessing, and praying for them. The love God intends is not feeling-oriented or self-centered. Rather, it involves the merciful treatment of others, and is grounded in and motivated by the character of God—God is merciful. Hear now these words.

²⁷ "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ 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. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask

for them again. ³¹ Do 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. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ 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. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.^[a] Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. ³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ 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.” Amen.

The title of the sermon: “God of Life”

The text: *And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. Genesis 45:5*

Let us pray: We are grateful, merciful God, for those occasions when we get a glimpse at your character through the gracious acts of your children. Thank you for your mysterious and wonderful ways of turning what others intend for evil into good. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

To love an enemy is simply impossible, according to theologian Beverly Gaventa, for an enemy is by definition someone hated rather than loved. An enemy who is loved is no longer an enemy.

Perhaps this is what Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he asked, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” This is the quote our son Paul Kieffer chose for his senior yearbook picture at Clayton High School. Little did we know then that I would soon receive the call to serve as Westminster’s 18th pastor and we would be moving to the holy ground of Abraham Lincoln, who brought together political enemies within his own cabinet, the *Team of Rivals*, and who successfully reconciled conflicting personalities and political factions on the path to the abolition of slavery and victory in the American Civil War.

There have been men and women throughout history who have led with this kind of grace, insight, and personal integrity. It is refreshing to be in the presence of such leadership, of those who are able to get beyond the politics of pettiness, revenge, and tit for tat, of those who are willing to put aside their personal feelings to do the work of reconciliation and preserving life.

Joseph was such a leader. He was able to do what Jesus asks each of us to do. Love our enemies. Pray for those who persecute us. Be merciful. The character of Joseph is revealed in this powerful and intimate moment of reconciliation with the brothers who became his enemies the day they sold him into slavery.

What happened to Joseph over the years since that betrayal is what today we call psychological growth. Joseph matured from an arrogant, young boy into a humble and thoughtful man. From the pit of despair, Joseph did rise with wisdom. Revenge was replaced by compassion. Growth is now offered to his brothers, as well. They have all been humbled by the trials and tribulations of life that have brought them closer to their true, whole selves.

Surely Joseph's character was developed through the hardships, injustices, and disappointments that began the day his brothers abandoned him. Rejection and disappointment have a way of helping us find out who we really are. On the day of their reunion Joseph understands that God's hand has been a part of these hardships to bring him to a position where he can save lives –and now he understands God was preparing him to save his own family from whom would descend the twelve tribes of Israel.

“God sent me before you for life!” Joseph exclaims to his befuddled brothers who face their real guilt in his presence. “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves...” Joseph reaffirms. His testimony is that, whatever may have been the intentions of his brothers or anyone else involved, God has been acting in these events “for life.”

Through the gift of faith Joseph is able to see how God has woven these painful experiences into the tapestry of his life. Joseph will later say to the brothers he forgives: *Even though you intended to do evil to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.*

It is as difficult for modern people as it was for ancient people to believe that God is at work even in the dark and destructive moments of life. One of the great obstacles to faith is that, no matter how hard one tries, it simply is not possible to identify grace or redemption in many human experiences and in particular, many believe that God is never present in human suffering and defeat. But the Joseph story leads us to a different conclusion, which is that, in spite of the awful tragedies from which God seems irretrievably absent, God is present still working in a mysterious way beyond our understanding. (Texts for Preaching Year C, page 153)

In Joseph's story Joseph is a paradigm of what the grace of God can do in human life: transform a curse into a blessing, revenge into forgiveness, and hatred into love. But Joseph is more than this, according to Martin Luther, Joseph is himself a Christ figure. Joseph was betrayed, mistreated, handed over to death. The One whom they thought was dead, is alive! And revealing himself as alive, Joseph offers forgiveness, a new beginning, and life.

In the insightful words of the late Episcopal priest and theologian John Sanford, “When the pattern of our lives becomes clear to us, even the darkness and pain can be seen to have its proper place. In Joseph's case, the evil the brothers intended against him was intended by God for the purification of his soul, the destruction of his egocentricity, and for a way to bring him to Egypt where he would perform a great work.” (John Sanford, The Man, 79)

The One who had every reason to reject a wayward foreign family, loves them even to the point of participating in their suffering...even as Jesus participated in the suffering of the world.

May we have the courage of Joseph –to listen to our dreams and to see God weaving the painful experiences of our lives into a tapestry of many colors and meaning.

“Finding meaning woven into the fabric of one's life gives shape and substance to living and allows engagement with others in authentic, joyous, and redemptive ways. So it was with Joseph and his brothers. So it is with us and with those we are called to serve. Evil remains evil until our consciousness and integrity grow because of it. Then God can use it for good...and for life.” (John Sanford, The Man, 79) Amen.