

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

February 24, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Genesis 45:3-81,15 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! **5** And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. **6** For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. **7** But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God.

15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

"Evil Overcome by Forgiveness"

I have to confess I don't know much about the Kardashians. They are famous. I couldn't really tell you what they are famous for or what any of them have accomplished in their careers. But this reality TV family is in the news. There is always drama surrounding the family. I'm not sure if that is the cause or effect of people paying attention to them. But it seems like the constant drama drives more people to pay attention to them.

If there was such a thing as reality TV 2,000 years before the birth of Jesus, the family of Joseph would have been a prime candidate to get great ratings. We don't have time to go through the entire book of Genesis, but a little background will be helpful to establish the dramatic setting we are plopped in the middle of in Genesis chapter 45. Joseph's father, Jacob, had two different wives and two other sort-of-wives. You don't have to have experience in family counseling to understand that is going to cause some conflicts.

So there was plenty of rivalry among Jacob's 12 sons. Of course, Jacob decided to throw some kerosene on that fire by making no efforts to hide the fact that Joseph was his favorite. And just in case his brothers forgot about this special treatment, he gave Joseph the equivalent of a neon flashing sign to wrap around him in the form of a special coat to wear around wherever he went. And Joseph was either completely oblivious to how non-favorite brothers might think of him or just decided to basically handle the situation like poking a pit bull behind a chainlink fence with a sharp stick. He gathered everyone together to tell them about his dream of all his brothers bowing down to worship him. And then another dream just like it. And since they were his brothers, they couldn't just brush it all aside. They plotted their revenge. Thoughts of murder and an elaborate coverup scheme filled their wounded hearts. Ultimately their homicidal plans were downgraded for a cleaner option. Selling Joseph into slavery would rid them of this nuisance and give them a little profit at the same time.

Now it's Joseph's turn for drama. He serves his Egyptian master with honor and dedication, but is thrown in prison for false accusation of sexual assault. In prison he is on his best behavior and earns the trust of the warden. Blessed with God's insight, he shows kindness to a fellow inmate who forgets him as soon as he is released. But eventually God gives him opportunity to tell God's plans for the kingdom of Egypt and gain a position of power and authority just below the Pharaoh himself.

In a great plot twist sure to get great ratings for reality TV, Joseph's brothers are forced to come to Egypt to buy grain just to keep themselves and their families alive. The camera pans over to a familiar face, but clean shaved from his Hebrew beard and dressed in Egyptian clothes. The camera zooms in on the man they must beg to get their food: it's Joseph! As the show cuts to commercial we just imagine all the thoughts running through Joseph's mind. What will he do to his brothers? Have twenty years of anger been simmering in his soul looking for this opportunity for revenge? Has he been dreaming up a way to plant evidence to entrap them and send them away on trumped up charges? Will he take advantage of his newfound power and authority he earned by his exemplary conduct after being sold as a slave? Will he find a way to enslave his brothers and lock them away so they experience first hand what they did to him? Will he make them grovel and beg before he even listens to them?

Something has to be done. Evil can't just be swept under a rug. Mistreatment at the hands of people we love can't just be ignored. "Wrongdoing rattles and possibly even undoes a relationship." (Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge*, p. 127) We can't go back in time and undone the wrong. The damage has been inflicted. The offense changes the way we see that person who wronged us. After genocide in Rwanda. After the casualties on civilians in Bosnia. After the terrible toll inflicted by atrocities in World War II, something had to be done. The pain is no less real when it is scaled down from the national and ethnic level to the family and personal level.

Revenge feels right. Revenge allows pain to respond in kind. Revenge takes injured pride and uncontrolled fear and punishes the wrongdoer. But we know revenge is wrong. It only makes matters worse. Revenge perpetuates a cycle of hurt and evil.

But justice seems fair. It's appropriate to condemn wrong. To name it and label it as wrong and hurtful and damaging. But we can't just reserve God's condemnation for the globally heinous crimes - for the slaughter of scores of civilians, the lengthy list of sins by serial killers, or the countless offenses by maniacal dictators. No, "To condemn heinous offenses but not light ones would be manifestly unfair. An offense is an offense and deserves condemnation." (Miroslav Volf, p. 139) No, the world is sinful. All the people of the world are sinful. None of us really wants God's justice to condemn and punish every sinful misdemeanor with the same standard he uses for global genocide. None of us would stand.

We would prefer to think of God as that spiritual Santa Claus or maybe a doting grandparent. First of all, we like to think of God as a doting grandparent, because we all like to think we are his favorite. We want God to pat us on the head and tell us what good children we've been. We don't want God prying too much into our personal business and

our personal lives. We want affirmation, not condemnation. When we realize we've done wrong, we don't want a scolding, we want support and understanding and encouragement to do better next time. But God the dotting grandparent falls apart if God should choose to treat anyone else as his favorite and affirm them instead of condemning them for hurting us.

Joseph knows something has to be done to his brothers. But Joseph doesn't choose revenge or justice. As soon as he has revealed his true identity he reassures his brothers: **"do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you."** (Genesis 45:5) Joseph forgives his brothers. Joseph traces his response back to God's work in his life: **"So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God."** (Genesis 45:8)

But did things really have to go this difficult route for Joseph? Joseph could have complained against the unfair treatment God allowed him to go through or the lengthy time it took for Joseph to be elevated to a position of authority. Joseph could have given up when his faithful service went unrewarded. He could have lost hope when he was forgotten and his prison sentence dragged on for weeks and months and years. He could have given in to bitterness and pain after being separated from his family in a foreign country for so many years without his family. Did he really have to give up his right for payback? Does God's way really demand that he just let them off the hook?

Joseph just gives us a glimpse of someone who experienced even greater injustice. Jesus himself was sent into a foreign world of sin so he could preserve life. Jesus was sold into the hands of religious leaders who hated him as a rival, betrayed by one of his closest friends. The one who taught **"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,"** was the same one who endured the unjust torture of flogging and mockery of a crown of thorns (Luke 6:27). The same Jesus who instructs **"bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you,"** cried out from his cross **"Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing"** (Luke 6:28; 23:34). Joseph was brought to Egypt so his plan could spare many lives throughout the intense famine. Jesus was brought safely through the grave so he could provide a great deliverance for every sinful soul.

Did it really have to be this way for Jesus? Actually, no. But this was the only way God could deal with all of our guilt and mine. He gathered up all the punishment for every wrong and every hurt we've ever committed and loaded them on Jesus. The cross was the only way your merciful Father could spare you from paying the punishment you deserve. Jesus took his place with human beings so he could suffer in our place and bring to completion God's plan of saving sinful humanity. No, it didn't have to be this way. But God's justice poured out on Jesus was the only way to do what needed to be done with the world's evil. It had to be forgiven through Jesus. Jesus did it for all: "There are no people who are sufficiently good so that God doesn't need to forgive them and Christ didn't die for them. There are no people who are too wicked for God to forgive them and for God to die for them. And there are no people whom God, for some...reason, decided not to forgive." (Miroslav Volf, p. 177,178)

There is a woman I met a few years ago whose life story is almost as shocking as Joseph's. She was a little girl in Germany when World War II started. Her father's bakery was confiscated by the Nazis. After the war she found herself in a prisoner of war camp as a teenager. After moving to America tragedy struck again when her husband died in a car accident. Unable to handle that grief, her own son took his life. And Erika would tell you she never had all the answers. She couldn't explain why God was allowing this to happen. But she never lost her confidence that God was controlling every event in her life according to his plans.

Let's be clear. God did not cause Joseph's brothers to sell him as a slave. God never condoned their wickedness or murderous hatred. And yet God used those wicked deeds to work out his plans for saving many lives. Just like God knows about your alcoholic father or your absentee mother, your husband who is emotionally distant or your constantly nagging wife, the co-workers who spread vicious rumors or the Facebook lies posted about you, the fellow Christian whose actions against you were so unChristian you can hardly believe it. God knows. God doesn't cause those sins. God doesn't even look the other way. But just like Joseph, God allows you to take the first step toward reconciliation. God turned the evil of Joseph's brothers for good not only for Joseph and Joseph's family, but also for many others. Even for those hateful brothers themselves.

Martin Luther and a useful image for what happens when Jesus lives inside of us through his forgiveness: "When fire heats an iron, the iron glows like fire." (Miroslav Volf, p. 150) The iron gives off heat because of the fire and only because of contact with the fire. In the same way Christ dwells in your heart through his forgiveness. God gives to us. God forgives us in Christ Jesus. God then transforms us into his instruments. God uses us to give to others and share his forgiveness with them. God overcomes evil in our lives through his forgiveness.

We know we will face drama in our lives. The kind we experience might not be exciting enough to get a reality TV audience. That drama often comes from the evil that takes place in our lives. Evil can be close to home or out there somewhere in the world. But God frames all evil in the grand scope of his great plan to carry out his salvation for all of humanity. Confident that God will work out his plan for his ultimate good even in the face of ongoing evil, God's people live in his freedom. We live freed from the need to respond with retribution and revenge. We rest securely in the justice of an all-forgiving God. We freely forgive others confident in God's mercy. And through us, God overcomes evil. God conquers that evil right there in our lives through his forgiveness. Amen.