



*Relationship Over Revenge*

*Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-7; I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38*

*Seventh Sunday after Epiphany, Sunday, February 27th, 2019*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel*

*Text: But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. (v. 27)*

One of the biggest decisions that have to make in life, a decision that will affect our happiness more than any other decision is this; do we seek relationships over revenge?

At a time when Palestine was occupied by the imperial might of ancient Rome, when the *Pax Romana* or “Roman Peace” demanded unquestioned obedience and was maintained by brutal oppression<sup>1</sup>, when dissenters were executed by the most brutal of means known to humanity, crucifixion, a humiliating death designed to intimidate much like the ISIS beheadings of today, the words of Jesus were startling. One might even say that they were naive.

In spite of all of this, Jesus saw a new world where, a world that the prophets of old envisioned, a world where the lion would lie down with the lamb, the child would play over the den of the adder, spears would be turned into pruning hooks, swords into plowshares, and all of God’s children would live in harmony. This alternative way sought relationships over revenge.

An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth may seem just but it was actually empty. As Martin Luther King, Jr. observed, “If we do an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, we will be a blind and toothless nation.”

We have no written record of Jesus’ thought process. We know that he was raised in a family who instilled the habit of worship in his heart. He regularly sang the Psalms, for they were the hymns written for worship. He would have heard the stories of his people and informed by the wisdom of the prophets. One of the Psalms that he would have sung was our Call to Worship, Psalm 37.

*Do not fret because of those who are evil or be envious of those who do wrong; for they are like grass that soon withers, like green plants that soon die. ... Trust in the Lord and do good.*

His temptation gave Jesus the opportunity to “trust in the way of the Lord” as nothing else could. And, I believe that he knew the story of Joseph, one of my favorite characters in the Old Testament because of his resilience. Joseph was not only resilient but a dreamer, or perhaps, better understood as a person

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<sup>1</sup> Chebon Kernell, *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2019*, February 23.

with a gift. He had night visions, dreams that one day he would be an important figure in the life of his family. But rather than keep these dreams to himself, he shared them with his family. His older brothers grew tired of his dreams in which he was also “the special one.” Their father Jacob didn’t help matters. He showed blatant favoritism to Joseph. He even gave him a precious coat of “many colors”, in some translations, or with “long sleeves” in other translations.

In any case, the brothers grew tired of him. In the youthful lack of good judgment and the abundant impulsiveness that males are known for possessing, they conspired to kill him by taking his special coat and throwing him into a pit to die. Perhaps out of “second thoughts” or maybe, making a little profit on the side, one of the brothers convinced the others to sell Joseph to a caravan bound for Egypt. The thinking seemed to have been that his “blood” wouldn’t be on their hands. They covered their tracks by dipping his coat in blood, presented it their father, and acted all sorrowful as they related to how Joseph had been killed by a lion. Thus, began Joseph’s long journey from the pit of despair to the crown.

Joseph was sold to an Egyptian named Potiphar. Potiphar soon recognized Joseph’s intelligence and unshakable honesty. Potiphar put him in charge of his household. Now, while Potiphar could trust Joseph without question, his wife was another matter. She had a roving amorous eye. Not accustomed to having her advances rejected, her unrequited advances toward Joseph left her embarrassed. Afraid of what her husband would do if he heard about her propositions, she made up a story about Joseph, one that landed him in prison, most likely awaiting execution.

In prison Joseph’s leadership shined once again. He was taken off of death row and put in charge of a section of the prison. He still had visions and gained some renown as an interpreter of dreams. Eventually word of his gift for interpreting dreams reached Pharaoh for the monarch had two recurrent and troubling dreams.

Pharaoh sent for Joseph who was not only able to interpret the dreams but developed a “game plan” as well. Joseph told Pharaoh that Egypt would experience seven years of abundant harvest and seven years of drought. In order to avoid famine, grain needed to be stored for the lean years to come. So impressed was Pharaoh with Joseph that Joseph became Pharaoh’s most trusted adviser, second only to Pharaoh himself.

When the famine arrived Jacob, Joseph’s father, sent Joseph’s older brothers to Egypt in search of relief. Joseph recognized his brothers immediately, but they did not recognize him. Why would they? They may have thought that Joseph was dead, but even if he wasn’t, this was the last place they expected him. I wonder if from time to time they were haunted by their action, especially whenever their father would grow sad and quiet around the time of Joseph’s birth or that awful day when he heard the news of Joseph’s death.

In any event, there came a day for the “big reveal”. And Joseph had to decide if he would *relationship* or *revenge*? Here’s what happened next.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him. They were stunned. Could this really be Joseph? Alive? After all of these years? How?

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me. I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. I can just imagine what was going on through their minds. Can’t you? Oh no, *this can’t be happening*. But then Joseph said something totally unexpected. He decided if he valued relationship or revenge more. I like to think his decision touched Jesus’ heart when he was told the story of this patriarch.

Joseph said, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ... 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; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ... I will provide for you. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute. ...

“Tell my father all about the honor accorded me in Egypt and bring him here quickly. “Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept. And Benjamin wept, too. “And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. And they talked.”

In his letter to the Corinthian church the apostle Paul invited serious Jesus followers to surround themselves with the things that represent God’s Kingdom. Hate, jealousy, exploitation, these are the things that cause suffering and harm. The teachings of Jesus shows us a society that represents God’s Kingdom. Love, Peace, Forgiveness, Justice <sup>2</sup>.

You see, Jesus pointed to a radical paradigm shift in which one gives up their right to revenge. Jesus presented the world with an alternative to “the harsh reality” of the world. Rather than entering into a mode of escalating violence which leads to more and more death, Jesus told his apostles, disciples and even the “crowd”, to do something radical <sup>3</sup>.

*Love your enemies and do good to those who hate you.*

People who take Jesus seriously know a generous God and therefore they can be generous themselves. They know a forgiving God, and can therefore be forgiving.

I invite you to listen again to today’s gospel lesson; this time as the late Eugene Peterson, pastor, theologian, and writer rendered our Savior’s words.

*“To you who are ready for the truth, I say this: Love your enemies. Let them bring out the best in you, not the worst. When someone gives you a hard time, respond with the energies of prayer for that person. If someone slaps you in the face, stand there and take it. If someone grabs your shirt, giftwrap your best coat and make a present of it. If someone takes unfair advantage of you, use the occasion to practice the servant life. No more tit-for-tat stuff. Live generously. Here is a simple rule of thumb for behavior: Ask yourself what you*

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<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Kernell

want people to do for you; then grab the initiative and do it for them! If you only love the lovable, do you expect a pat on the back? Run-of-the-mill sinners do that. If you only help those who help you, do you expect a medal? Garden-variety sinners do that. If you only give for what you hope to get out of it, do you think that's charity? The stingiest of pawnbrokers does that. I tell you, love your enemies. Help and give without expecting a return. You'll never—I promise—regret it. Live out this God-created identity the way our Father lives toward us, generously and graciously, even when we're at our worst. Our Father is kind; you be kind. Don't pick on people, jump on their failures, criticize their faults—unless, of course, you want the same treatment. Don't condemn those who are down; that hardness can boomerang. Be easy on people; you'll find life a lot easier. Give away your life; you'll find life given back, but not merely given back—given back with bonus and blessing. Giving, not getting, is the way. Generosity begets generosity.”

So, what's it going to be in your life; relationship or revenge?

To God be the glory. Amen.