

God's Purpose

Seventh Sunday After the Epiphany

Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his 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 he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Family gatherings can be wonderful or our worst nightmare. Some families, like mine, are so close that the family gathers several times a year just to caught-up and enjoy each other's company. Four of my siblings winter and vacation together several times a year. In three weeks about 50 of us will gather in Dayton, Ohio to celebrate birthdays. I believe some of the things my parents taught us were humility and a sense of concern for the other's well being. I hear that some families were not taught these principles and are so estranged they only gather at funerals. Our scripture is about the life of one of those estranged families.

This dramatic scene of our scripture follows the stories of Joseph's growing up, his being sold into slavery, his becoming a dream interpreter for the Pharaoh, his ruling over all the land of Egypt, and his confronting of his brothers. Our scripture describes how the drama turned on Joseph's reconciling act. "I am Joseph," he said to his astonished brothers. They could not speak.

What happened to Joseph over these 22 years of separation is what today we call psychological growth. Joseph was an arrogant young man. His self-importance angered his brothers so much that they had sold him into slavery. From his pit of despair, Joseph did rise with wisdom. Revenge was replaced with compassion. Growth was offered to his brothers, as well. They had all been humbled by the trials and tribulations of life that had brought them closer to their true, whole selves.

Humility is the virtue that may come when one's pride (egocentricity) is confronted. Joseph had to devise a way for his brothers to surrender to him and receive forgiveness, after he had already worked through the process of forgiving them and himself for past wrongs. Surrender is a painful, personal process in our relationships, our faith communities, and our country. To surrender humbly to a higher good does lead to new life, love, and a deeper joy. Joy is a sign of that reconciliation! As the brothers were brought into the presence of the living Joseph, they faced their real guilt. Joseph said, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Reconciliation is possible because in facing our own frailties, vulnerabilities, and even hostilities, we come to understand that divine purposes were at work.

It always gives us pause to declare the ways that God is working out God's purposes. To say God's ways are our ways leads to arrogance. Not to name the presence of God in our human affairs leads to a thin, withered, shrunken, dried up faith. In looking back on his own life, Joseph discerned that the hand of God had woven things together for good. Even those things that were hard, difficult, and perhaps even evil had come under the auspices and protection of God's activity in human history. This declaration goes to the heart of the gospel where the question of how God and evil can share the same space.

The English mystic Julian of Norwich lived at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century. During those years the Black Death was the most devastating pandemic in human history, killing seventy-five million people. Julian was a

Benedictine nun who herself was mortally ill. During her illness she had visionary experiences. Recording these visions, she wrote the first book by a woman in English. "And so our good Lord answered to all the questions and doubts which I could raise," she wrote, "saying most comfortingly: I may make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well." This is not cheery optimism, or smiley-button faith. Rather, it is an affirmation of the mystery of God's love in all things, in all circumstances, even in the midst of personal and enormous human tragedies. With the perspective of God and God's own love being present in all things and through all things, Julian was able to live fully and faithfully. Like Joseph, Julian was in the stream with those who have come to see the pattern of divine love woven into life, bringing good out of evil.

This pattern was also explained and clarified by the late 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 pride and selfishness, and for a way to bring him to Egypt where he performed a great work." Joseph came through the dark night of the soul, where his attitude was shaped to see a pattern in his life. Finding meaning woven into the fabric of one's life gives shape and substance to living and allows engagement with others in a conscious and honest way. So it was with Joseph and his brothers. So it is with us and with those we are called to serve. Sanford continued, "Evil remains evil until man's consciousness grows because of it. Then God can use it for good" (Sanford, *The Man*, 79).

It is easy for us to remember the times we were the victim of wrongs! But in our own spiritual journeys, we must remember those times where we too were harsh, vengeful, unforgiving, or indifferent. In our relationships with our children, our spouse or partner, our church community, and our neighbors and colleagues, if we reflect long enough, we

can recall such hurtful encounters. Brought to our knees and humbled by acknowledging our own egregious and hurtful deeds, God comes inviting us to receive divine compassion in our brokenness. Looking back, we see how God has been at work within and among us and offering strength and meaning for our present and the future. All that Joseph's brothers had done came into their awareness and in the light of Joseph's compassion, they embraced their deeds. Reconciliation happened. Sanford concluded that the brothers had undergone "psychological development in the only way it is ever possible: painful self-confrontation, a reckoning with the past, and a willingness to give up egocentricity in order to serve God" (Sanford, *The Man*, 79).

The work of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was aimed at that, as well. It allowed those who had committed egregious acts during the time of apartheid to confess what they had done, come to terms with their past, and then be restored to their humanity by the forgiveness of the human community.

Divine love transcends and conquers all when we surrender our own pride and selfishness. That surrender may come through the shattering experiences that we do not welcome, but that reveal God's presence for our growth. **Alan Johnson**

Our congregation can enter that world. Joseph's story has space for us because, however different our reality is from Joseph's, God's reconciling movement in the world still and always hinges on forgiveness. Everyone has access, because the dramatic moment of Genesis 45 longs to be played out again every time someone is wronged. A pope steps into an Italian jail cell and forgives his would-be assassin; a grieving mother walks across a tense courtroom to embrace the man whose drunk driving snatched away her son's life; in South Africa, race inconceivably forgives race. Joseph's God lives on in a new form. A wife forgives her husband, a friend forgives his friend, an enemy forgives enemy—reconciliation breaks out in these moments, and suddenly the position of the victim has radically changed. In the moment of forgiveness, the wronged one is

transformed from critic of the world as it is to co creator with God of a brand-new world. And in that new creation, a light comes on: maybe our world is not so different from Joseph's after all. Maybe forgiveness and reconciliation are God's true prosperity. **Allen Hilton**

Can you imagine what wonderful works we can do for God when God has changed us from the inside out; when we are changed from selfish and prideful persons to forgiving and sharing persons? Can you image that Joseph's family was reconciled? Did the brother vacation together, have wonderful family gatherings, do ministry together for and with their families and their community? We will be ready and able to be used for God's purposes in the world when we surrender our pride and forgive others. Dear Lord, let it be so!

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.