



A WAY FORWARD

February 24, 2019, Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Genesis 45:1-15; Luke 6:27-35

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One of my favorite musicals is Stephen Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. The first act introduces us to familiar figures such as Cinderella, Jack of Beanstalk fame, a baker and his wife, and Little Red Riding Hood. We also meet a witch, played by Bernadette Peters, who is the mother of Rapunzel. We follow all their stories as they intertwine and the first act ends with its "happily ever after" conclusions. But then comes Act 2. Rapunzel, who had married her prince in Act 1, appears in Act 2 as a troubled, hysterical woman. She and her mother, the witch, come face to face. When the mother reaches out to her daughter, Rapunzel shrinks back in fear. "What did I do?" the witch asks. "What have you done?" Rapunzel repeats with incredulity. "Oh, I don't know...you just locked me up in a tower for sixteen years, and when I did escape, you blinded my husband, banished me to a deserted island where I gave birth to twins...alone! Thanks to you, I'll never be normal!" she wails. At this, Bernadette Peters hesitates, looks a little to the side and replies, "I was just trying to be a good mother..."

Filled with no less intrigue, it's no wonder that the story of Joseph also seemed like rich Broadway fodder. Joseph's story is rivaled only by the story of David in the Old Testament in its narrative power and detail. Today it is as if the lectionary is seating us for the closing scene, having missed Act 1, the intermission, and most of Act 2 as well. We come upon Pharaoh's palace with the brothers standing before Joseph. The very ones who had thrown Joseph into a pit in a fit of rage and sibling rivalry years ago. They who had stripped him of his prized coat. They who even made a little money off of him by selling him to a traveling band of Egyptians—showing Joseph in one last, hateful gesture how little he was worth to them. Then the brothers got their story straight on the way home...telling their father, Jacob



(himself no stranger to trickery) that his favorite son was dead, ripped apart by a wild animal. They watched as their father wept then, and every year after as Joseph's birthday rolled around. Jacob was left to dote on Benjamin, the baby of the family, for fear of ever losing another son.

They had no idea, of course, that Joseph landed in an Egyptian jail cell for a crime he didn't commit. How his dreams they so resented had become his ticket out of prison and into Pharaoh's palace. How Joseph's management skills got him one promotion after another until he was Secretary of Agriculture for the empire. Thanks to Joseph's planning, Egypt was coasting through the very famine that brought them there starving, to plead for food.

How delicious it all was...they had no idea who he was, but he knew them very well. And now he held their life in his hands, the tables turned.

Chapters 42-44 of Genesis recount the tricks Joseph played on them next, the sweetness of his revenge. He stood before them in his Egyptian clothes and spoke Egyptian, using an interpreter. He ordered them back home to bring their youngest brother, while keeping another brother as ransom. They returned with Benjamin, guarding him with their lives because it would break old Jacob's heart to lose the baby of the family. Then Joseph hid a silver chalice in Benjamin's sack, accused him of stealing it, and death or imprisonment was the only end to this set of circumstances. That's where today's scene opens.

In all the times I've read this story, I had never noticed the little detail about the language Joseph used. How he spoke to them in the language of Egypt, using an interpreter. By using this foreign language with his brothers, he keeps the distance, the estrangement between them. So it is a moment of deep emotion when Joseph sends every Egyptian out of the room. Alone with his Hebrew brothers, then, Joseph speaks to them in language they share. It is the language of their childhood, of family. It is the language of intimacy. In words they recognize even if they do not recognize the person speaking to them, he says: "I am Joseph. Is my father still



alive?” And with those words come tears and weeping. No interpreter needed for that; even the Egyptians overhear.

If you look at the text carefully, you’ll notice that language—or the lack of it—continues to affect what happens. Verse 3: “But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.” Joseph has the power to speak and how he will use that power controls where the story—and the future—will go.

It is the hardest thing in the world to do: in a situation of brokenness and estrangement and hurt to find the language that allows people on different sides to speak to each other and understand one another. Silence will not close the gap. Speaking different languages will not suffice. The path to forgiveness and the healthiest way forward is dependent upon finding some way to talk and to listen to each other. If shared language can be found, perhaps forgiveness will come and even reconciliation can be effected. Or maybe we will still go our separate ways, but we will not have to look over our shoulder anymore in fear or resentment, for we have said what needed to be said. We have understood and we have been understood. I don’t know who said it, but I have always remembered this quote: “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”

Today the story of Joseph and his brothers is paired with Luke’s continued Sermon on the Plain. Like Luke’s version of the Beatitudes we heard last week, this passage doesn’t show up very often. Yet these verses hold the essence of the gospel, distill it into its simplest, yet most challenging and outrageous terms:

“Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you.” The specific examples that follow show how hard this can be. And then comes that oft-quoted but too-seldom-followed Golden Rule: “Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

These words of Jesus led Martin Luther King, Jr. to adopt and to train people in the civil rights era to respond to violence with non-violence. To respond, in fact, with love. We have moved very far from such disciplined commitment ever since. In a



sermon on this Luke text, King says hate “tears down and destroys” because that is the purpose of hate. “But love builds up. It creates and redeems.”ⁱ

In the ancient world, social relationships were built on the ethics of reciprocity. Ours today are, too, to a large degree. “You do this for me and I will do this for you.” It is true in business but also in friendships. Seneca and Aristotle wrote quite plainly about the world of patrons and benefactors; how the world turned on relationships of reciprocity—one gives and expects in return. Tit for tat social relations. Seneca noted that as a rule, one should avoid benefitting someone who cannot repay, is unworthy or an ingrate; and enemies by definition were unlikely to return favors, so they could be excluded from any obligation on our part to extend generosity. In the empire of Roman occupation, Jesus speaks this scandalous new ethic. And lest love of enemies be sentimentalized, he tells us how to put such love into action. Do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you. Pray for the very ones abusing you. He does not ask us to be weak in the face of an enemy, far from it! The cheek-turning love of Jesus is instead an exercise of strength, with the power to break the cycle of reciprocal acts that only perpetuate anger and hurt and can lead to violence. On the Mount of Olives, one of the last acts of Jesus’ life in Luke’s Gospel occurs when Judas leads a crowd out to betray Jesus. One of Jesus’ followers pulls out a sword and cuts off the right ear of a slave of the high priest. Jesus said, “No more of this!” Then he touched the man’s ear and healed him.ⁱⁱ

An article I read as I studied the texts for today is still churning up my mind and heart. It suggests that Jesus’ command to love our enemies has not only earthly implications but heavenly ones, too. Its title is: “Love Your Heavenly Enemy” and asks this question: “How are we going to live eternally with those we can’t stand now?” It begins by quoting theologian Karl Barth who once was asked: “Is it true that one day in heaven we will see again our loved ones?” To which Barth responded with a chuckle, “Not only the loved ones!”ⁱⁱⁱ The author then lays out the provocative case that heaven is not just the creation of a new future with a “fresh start” but is also the “redemption of yesterday, today, and tomorrow—the

* Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation, the written accounts occasionally stray from proper grammar and punctuation.



redemption of our whole lived life.”^{iv} It will be this for all of us when we meet before God and one another.

Elwin Wilson was a former supporter of the Ku Klux Klan. In 1961, the Freedom Riders arrived at the Greyhound Bus Station in Rock Hill, S.C. Two of them, one white and one black, entered the “whites only” waiting station. A group of young men quickly assaulted them. Albert Bigelow, who was white, was one of men assaulted. The other was John Lewis. Lewis and Bigelow did not fight back, and they declined to press charges. Decades later, Elwin Wilson began seeking forgiveness for his former acts of violence. Wilson called *The Rock Hill Herald* in 2009 to say that he was one of the men who led the bus station beating and that he had committed other violent acts, too. It was then he learned that one of his victims was John Lewis, who had become a member of Congress and had served his country for many years. In an interview with the paper, Wilson said a friend had asked him, “If you died right now, do you know where you would go?” Wilson said he replied, “To hell.” This led him to make repeated apologies for his racist acts committed decades earlier.

With his confession made, Mr. Wilson traveled to Washington D.C. and met with Mr. Lewis, who quickly expressed his forgiveness. John Lewis recalled: “He started crying, his son started crying, and I started crying.”

Jesus once said, “Love your enemies.”

Someone has said, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.”

Joseph’s story might have ended in justified revenge, refusal and death. But instead, it ended with the future enlarged. His family did not die of starvation or of unresolved guilt and anger. Though largely unnoticed, God was at work in it all, making a future possible not only for Joseph and his brothers, but for all of Israel, too.



Mr. Wilson spoke slowly and with a thick drawl when he said on CNN: “Well, my daddy always told me that a fool never changes his mind and a smart man changes his mind. And that’s what I’ve done and I’m not ashamed of it. I’m not trying to be a Martin Luther King or something like that.” When he died 4 years later, perhaps he felt a bit more prepared to live in heaven not only with his loved ones but with everyone else, too.

John Lewis had not remembered the faces or known the names of the men who beat him that day, but he noted Mr. Wilson’s apology was sincere and was the first he had ever received for the violence done to him in those years.^v

One minister said in 37 years he has never had a church member come to him and ask for help in forgiving an enemy. Indeed, the notion of “enemies” is a strong word left to nations for the most part. It is a word we leave behind in childhood, like the same minister who recalled that he decided the kid who sat in the desk behind him in 3rd grade was his enemy and when he told his mother this, she said, “Don’t be ridiculous. His mother is in my book club!”^{vi}

But most of us do have some story of hurt and rupture we carry around. Some may never be fully reconciled here on earth because it wouldn’t be safe or it is simply too late. But we can practice the language to and actions of love. We can choose to do good to people who hate us...to bless them and to pray for them. And to weep over all that has happened and all that God might one day accomplish—allowing God to make a future larger than we could have imagined possible.

“Love your enemies,” Jesus said one day. “No more of this!” Jesus said some time later. “Father forgive them,” He said the next day from the cross. Words uttered not in weakness, but in great power and strength. Uttered, offered in love, which builds up. Love that creates and redeems, because this is what love does.

Amen.



ⁱ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Love Your Enemies,” A Sermon Delivered in the Andrew Rankin Memorial Chapel of Howard University.

ⁱⁱ Luke 22:47-51.

ⁱⁱⁱ Miroslav Volf, “Love your Heavenly Enemy,” in *Christianity Today*, October 23, 2000, 94-97.

^{iv} Volf, 97.

^v Obituary: “Elwin Wilson, Who Apologized for Racist Acts, Dies at 76” written by William Yardley, *The New York Times*, April 1, 2013.

^{vi} Moffett S. Churn, “Between Text and Sermon: Luke 6:27-36” in *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology*, 2014, Vol. 68(4), 428-430.