

Scripture Readings and Sermon

February 20, 2022 by Rev. Mark Brechin

Commentary on Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Apart from the brief stories of Isaac and Noah, there are three main sagas in the Book of Genesis: Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. The reading this morning comes at the end of the eight chapter saga of Joseph. Quick recap of Joseph helps to set up this passage. Joseph was blessed by God with dreams and dream interpretation. Jacob loved Joseph and his brothers deeply resented him. This resentment led the brothers to sell Joseph into slavery where Joseph's ability to interpret dreams eventually made him an adviser to Pharaoh. God used Joseph's misfortune to provide a means by which Jacob and his family might be saved during a disastrous famine which Joseph predicted and planned for. After a little petty revenge by Joseph, Joseph forgives his brothers in this final scene of reconciliation. Through faith, Joseph is able to perceive God's redemption through the events of his life and heals his family. What was meant to be a short term safety net during the time of famine, however, will become a dependence upon Egypt as they forget God's promises which will set the stage for the Exodus story.

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

How long do you think it took Joseph to come to this understanding?

Have you ever been hurt or betrayed by a family member?

Did the pain of the injury ever fully go away?

Where you able to see God working for good despite the pain?

When have difficult situations put you in a place or position that was actually beneficial?

What does this say about living by faith into the mystery of God?

Commentary on Luke 6:27-38

After Jesus proclaims, "Blessed are you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man", he tells the disciples to love their enemies. The message is clear - to truly follow Jesus is to make enemies of the world. Jesus, however, tells the disciples not to respond with hate but with love and compassion. Why should the disciples be loving and compassionate, because God the Father is loving and compassionate "for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful." It is not simply, "Do to others as you would have them do to you" for "even sinners do the same". The "golden rule" is the minimum standard for a society. What Jesus is driving at is not simply morality but eternal judgment. This will provide the foundation for part of Jesus' prayer in 11:4 "And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us." We love and are compassionate not because we are inherently good but because God is loving and compassionate towards us. We will receive measure for measure the love and compassion we honestly show others.

Luke 6:31 Do to others as you would have them do to you.

Have you ever been misjudged?

When has an assumption about you had negative consequences?

Do we sometimes misjudge other people by their actions without knowing their motives?

Have you ever heard someone say "I would never" without understanding the circumstance?

How does our limited perspective effect this golden rule?

Can we truly know what to do if we don't know how it will impact their lives?

Commentary on 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Having addressed the fact of Christ's resurrection as the first fruit, Paul then addresses the question of what will happen to the rest of the harvest at the time of the resurrection. Continuing this theme of harvest and fruit, Paul describes our physical body as a seed. If some picked up an acorn or a mustard seed or even a grain of wheat and did not know where it came from, they would have no idea what it would look like when it was grown. Our physical bodies are the shell of the seed which must be shed in order for the life within to break forth. The shell is perishable but the life within is imperishable because it came from God. Just as the first Adam was made of dirt (the shell) and then was given the breath of God (life), so the image of dust (the shell) must go so that the image of the soul can be in heaven. This argument is both challenging and reassuring. It is challenging when, based on the physical resurrection of Jesus with the scars, many expressions of Christianity have customs regarding a physical burial, the direction the body must face, and the condition the body should be in after death. It is reassuring, however, to those who like the families of the victims of 9/11 have no body to bury.

1 Corinthians 15:50 flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

How do you understand the resurrection of the dead?

Does this impact your views on cremation and funerals?

What does this mean for a body lost at sea, burned in a fire, or a victim of war or disasters?

Does this mean that our physical body has no real meaning?

How do you balance this emphasis on the soul with the goodness of God's creation?

Does Paul's analogy go too far negating the physical to make his point?

Reflection on Genesis 45:3-11, 15, Luke 6:27-38, 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50

Sermon "A Better Way"

What motivates us? According to the neuroscientist Paul MacLean, the brain has three dominant structures. The first structure is the basal ganglia often called the reptilian or primal brain which ensures our survival. This survival instinct includes the defense of self, family, and personal property. The fight or flight response is said to be based on this primal instinct. Before neuroscience or psychology, the Jewish and Christian theologians understood this motivation as sin. While it may promote individual survival, it often goes against the larger community and God's divine plan.

For Paul, this instinct was the result of the flesh. Only by rejecting the flesh can we become followers of Christ. It is by the grace of the Holy Spirit that we can find new life beyond our base instincts. Paul, in Romans, makes this argument in regards to the law which sets limits on our primal instincts and the Spirit which enables a selfless life of love. In his letter to the Corinthians, it is this selfless life of love that will be resurrected leaving behind the base survival needs of our mortal bodies. For this reason, Paul says that only the spirit can enter heaven. This is not a rejection of the goodness of creation but rather our self preservation instincts that often put love of self over love of others or of God or even love of God's creation.

Paul's call to love others over our self love is a reflection of Jesus' teaching. Recognizing that people are primarily driven by their primal instincts, societies organize themselves based on laws to minimize the destructive and chaotic nature of extreme individualism. There are punishments for theft, assault, and other acts of aggression. These punishments range from social ostracism to incarceration. Ideally families, however, use the promise of love and acceptance rather than the threat of punishment to function. In Jesus' sermon, he appeals to us not to act as a society but rather as the family of God. End the cycle of hate and violence by sharing and forgiving. Rather than judge which individual has more claim, show mercy by sharing the resources equally with compassion.

This call to act as a family also calls us to act out of compassion rather than our primal instincts.

A phrase I grew up with concerning compassion was to “walk a mile in someone's shoes”. While the origin of this American phrase is not clearly known, a poem by a licensed preacher in the Methodist Episcopal Church. In 1895, Mary Torrans Lathrap wrote “Judge Softly” which later became to be known by its most famous and quoted line — “Walk a Mile in His Moccasins.” Lathrap became known as the “The Daniel Webster of Prohibition” speaking to the plight of those who suffered from the damaging effects of alcoholism. In the poem, she says, “Don’t sneer at the man who is down today, unless you have felt the same blow that caused his fall or felt the shame that only the fallen know.” Compassion and empathy are key to understanding Jesus' “Golden Rule”. We can not do unto others unless we first place ourselves in their situation. It is only then that we can begin to grasp what we would hope that others would do for us. When we live together as a family, we begin to appreciate the difficulties and challenges people face creating a bond of compassion and empathy.

This bond of compassion is illustrated by the conclusion of Joseph's story in Genesis. Joseph had every right to make his brother's suffer for the pain he had suffered. Joseph, however, looked beyond the need for retribution to see God's hand of mercy and grace. God transformed Joseph's journey of injustice to a destination of salvation. There is a danger to focus on God's plan which somehow minimizes the injustice Joseph suffered. The focus should be on how by faith in God, Joseph did not allow those injustices to rule his life or cause him to retreat further into his primal instinct for self preservation. Instead, Joseph was receptive to God's grace which opened Joseph's eyes not only to his own suffering but to the future suffering of so many through drought and famine. Joseph acted out of compassion by loving the foreign land of his owners and in so doing ended up saving his entire family. Through those same eyes of compassion, Joseph did not see his brothers as enemies but rather as broken people who needed mercy far more than judgment.

Every day, we are faced with reacting to the world based on our primal instinct or giving that instinct over to God's loving Spirit. When we live into the Spirit, we find compassion and empathy not only for our neighbors but also for ourselves. Forgiveness and mercy chart the path to a new life of salvation not only in this life but the next. As our love for God increases, God's love for others through us begins to shrink societies into a family of broken people hungry for God's love.