

Sermon – The Gift of Mercy  
Scripture – Genesis 45:1-11,15, Luke 6:27-38  
Sunday, February 20, 2022  
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Today's first scripture reading from Genesis 45 is the culminating passage of Joseph's story, Jacob's favorite son who was sold into slavery by his jealous brothers and who rose as a leader in Egypt to provide relief during a time of famine. Scholars have observed how different in character Joseph's story is from other stories of the patriarchs in Genesis. One cannot help but notice the absence of God as a central figure. Yet, when Joseph discloses his identity to his brothers and provides a theological interpretation of their earlier betrayal, one realizes that Joseph understands God has been present all along...at work to bring good out of evil, to bring life out of death—and to use Joseph's life to save the lives of many including his own family. Hear now the Word of God.

*Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> 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. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you for life. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all Pharaoh's house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.' ... <sup>15</sup> And Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him. Amen.*

The gospel reading for today, Luke 6:27-38, continues Jesus' Sermon on the Plain which parallels the more familiar Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Jesus asks his followers the impossible, to "love their enemies," and then suggests this means doing good, blessing, and praying for them. The love God intends is not feeling-oriented. Rather, it involves the merciful treatment of others and is rooted in the character of God—who is merciful. Hear now these words.

*<sup>27</sup> "But I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, <sup>28</sup> bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. <sup>29</sup> If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. <sup>30</sup> Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. <sup>31</sup> Do to others as you would have them do to you. <sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you,*

*what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. <sup>34</sup> If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. <sup>35</sup> But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for God is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. <sup>36</sup> Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. <sup>37</sup> “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; <sup>38</sup> give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” Amen.*

The title of the sermon: “The Gift of Mercy”

The text: *“But I say to you, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. Luke 6:27*

Let us pray: We are grateful, merciful God, for those occasions when we get a glimpse at your character through the gracious acts of others. Thank you for your mysterious and wonderful way of turning what others intend for evil into good. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

To love an enemy is simply impossible according to New Testament scholar Dr. Beverly Gaventa for an enemy is, by definition, someone who is hated rather than loved. An enemy who is loved is no longer an enemy.

Perhaps this is what Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he said, “Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends?” Abraham Lincoln had the unusual capacity to bring together political enemies and did so within his own cabinet, called the *Team of Rivals* by author Doris Kearns Goodwin, The History Channel’s three-part documentary “Abraham Lincoln” produced by Goodwin begins tonight. It is based on her book Leadership: In Turbulent Times and outlines the complexities of young Abraham Lincoln who grows to become President Lincoln, the man who saved the Union, won the war, and secured emancipation.

There have been men and women throughout history who have led in turbulent times of suffering, conflict, bigotry, and bondage with this kind of skill, mercy, and character. It is refreshing to be in the presence of such leadership: those who can get beyond the politics of pettiness, revenge, and tit for tat, those who are willing to put aside their personal feelings to do the work of reconciliation on behalf of the greater good.

Joseph was such a leader. He was able to do what Jesus asks each of us to do. Love our enemies. Pray for those who persecute us. Be merciful. The character of Joseph is revealed in this powerful and intimate moment of reconciliation with the brothers decades after they became his enemies by selling him into slavery.

Since that betrayal Joseph grew both psychologically and spiritually, a journey which like Abraham Lincoln’s, was full of vicissitudes and complexities. Joseph matured from an arrogant, self-absorbed young boy into a humble, generous, and thoughtful man. Surely Joseph’s character was developed through the hardships, injustices, and disappointments that began the

day his brothers abandoned him. Rejection and life's adversities have a way of helping us find out who we really are. On the day of their reunion Joseph affirms that God's hand has been a part of these hardships to bring him to a position where he can save lives—and now he understands God was preparing him to save his own family from whom would descend the twelve tribes of Israel.

“God sent me before you for life!” Joseph exclaims to his befuddled brothers who face their real guilt in his presence. “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves,” Joseph reaffirms. He insists whatever may have been the intentions of his brothers or anyone else involved, God has been acting in these events “for life.”

Through the gift of faith Joseph can see how God has woven these painful experiences into the tapestry of his life. Joseph will later say to the brothers he shows mercy and forgives: *Even though you intended to do evil to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people.*

It is as difficult for us today as it was then to believe God is at work in the devastating and painful moments of our lives. One of the great obstacles to faith is the assumption that God is never present in human suffering and defeat. However, the Joseph story affirms otherwise. Joseph's journey is a paradigm of what the mercy of God can do in our lives: transform a curse into a blessing, revenge into mercy, and hatred into love.

For the great reformer Martin Luther, Joseph is more than a paradigm, Joseph is himself a Christ figure. He was betrayed, mistreated, and handed over to death. Part of the disbelief his brothers had upon their reunion is that all these years they believed Joseph was dead. It turns out the one whom they thought was dead, is alive! Joseph, in revealing himself to be alive, offers his brothers the gift of mercy, forgiveness, a new beginning, and life.

The story of Joseph has always been one of my favorites. I have a distinct memory of watching the musical, “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Coat” with our young adolescent son Paul and his friend Alosha one August afternoon after leaving work early. I was in a great deal of emotional pain following a betrayal amid a complicated and unhealthy staff dynamic. Joseph was just what I needed. I found solace and inspiration humming the delightful tunes and affirming the good God brings out of evil intended by others. I persevered, I prayed, I kept my head down, I focused on ministry, and, seven years later, by the gift of God's mercy, I found a new beginning and life in a gracious and generous call to serve and to lead this congregation: a congregation founded in turbulent times of human bondage on the premise of mercy and freedom and led by abolitionist preacher, the Rev. Albert Hale, friend and counselor to the Martyr President.

May we each have the courage of Joseph—when we are young to pursue our dreams and as we grow older to see God's hand weaving the painful and disappointing experiences of our lives into a tapestry of many colors and meaning.

Finding meaning woven into the fabric of one's life gives shape and substance to living and allows engagement with others in authentic, joyous, and redemptive ways. So, it was with Joseph and his brothers. So, it was with Jesus and his followers. So, it is with each of us and with those whom we are called to serve and to share the good news of God's mercy. Amen.