

Meditation – “You Intended, God Intended”

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Scripture Reading – Genesis 50:15-21

Rev. Trajan McGill

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Springfield, Illinois

Our reading today comes from the book of Genesis, chapter 50, verses 15 through 21. Listen now for God’s Word to you in this passage, an excerpt from the life of the biblical patriarch Joseph:

15 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 "Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." 19 But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

This is the Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The title of the meditation – “You Intended, God Intended”

The text: “But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...’” Genesis 50:19-20a

The scripture for today is a tiny piece cut out of a large story,¹ so let us take a moment to call to mind the context in which it sits. This encounter between Joseph and his brothers comes from almost the very end of the long narrative of the life of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of the patriarch Jacob, who is also known as Israel. These twelve sons are the beginning of the twelve tribes of Israel, so the stories at this point in the Bible are foundational narratives for the entire tale of the people of Israel.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is one of troubles and separation from early on. His brothers are jealous of their father’s favoritism toward Joseph, in part demonstrated by his gift of a fancy coat, and angered by what they perceive as haughtiness on Joseph’s part. Eventually they throw him in a pit, discuss potentially killing him, and ultimately decide instead to sell him off to some passing slave traders to be rid of him.

His story takes him down to Egypt in slavery, rising up eventually to a position of trusted authority, then losing this and being cast into prison, after surviving that being lifted up again, and finally rising to a very high role, governing over all of Egypt and second only to Pharaoh himself. It is while in that position that he finally encounters his brothers once more. When they travel to Egypt

¹ See Genesis chapters 37 – 50, nearly all of which are devoted to the story of Joseph.

hoping to find food during a famine, they find themselves unknowingly at his mercy. He eventually reveals to them who he is, and brings the whole family down to Egypt to take care of them during the rest of the famine.

At the point of our reading today, their father Jacob has finally died, the sons have finished the time of mourning and burial, and they have suddenly come to fear that perhaps their father was the only thing keeping Joseph from getting his revenge. It is then that they come to him, as we've just heard, and tell him that their father's last wish was for Joseph to forgive them.

Now, we did not read the chapters prior to this just now, but if you do, you will find that there was an extended gathering of all the sons at their father's deathbed, at which point he gave each of them a blessing, and explained his desire to be buried not in Egypt but back in his own homeland. One thing he does not ever mention there is an explicit wish for Joseph to forgive his brothers, so while the scripture doesn't directly say that the brothers are lying about this request, it is heavily implied.

Now the likelihood that they were making up this dying request from their father was surely just as obvious to Joseph as it is to us, and this only enhances how dramatic the most remarkable moment in this passage is: Joseph completely leaving aside any thought of grudge or payback and instead weeping in reconciliation with the brothers who had eliminated him from their lives so many years before.

His response of reassurance is this: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as [God] is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."

This is certainly a gracious response. But one wishes we could ask Joseph a few questions about what he is implying here. "You intended to do harm," he says, but "God intended it for good." What does this mean to Joseph when he says this? Now it is true that one of the patterns of speech we often use when forgiving people is to say something like, "It was no big deal." Is that what he's doing? Sometimes we act as though forgiveness equates to pretending the offense wasn't actually that big, which may be mistaken, but sometimes the reason we do is because we're trying to talk ourselves into doing the forgiving and attempting to be gentle with the other person. Is that what Joseph is doing? Simply diminishing his brothers' crime to the point where it isn't any big deal, "and see, good happened in the end anyway?"

Maybe, but that would be *quite* a diminishment in this case. He mentions that they intended to do harm, but of course they did not merely *intend* to do harm, they succeeded quite well. Joseph was betrayed, hurt, left alone, sold into slavery and imprisoned, and their father was for years left thinking his son had been killed by wild animals. So why is Joseph extending them this grace at all?

"God intended it for good." Is he saying God intended harm to come to Joseph in order that good might come of it later? Were they doing God's will by hurting him? This reminds me a little of where, in the book of Romans, Paul famously points out that God responds to sin with grace, and then faces the question: should I sin more, then, so that grace may abound?² Paul's answer is no, and I

² See Romans 5 and 6, particularly 5:20 – 6:14.

suspect ours should be here, too. We aren't told that God intended the malice that began Joseph's long journey, only told that God intended something other than evil as its final outcome.

Is the wrong made not wrong, then, by the final outcome? Does the theology expressed by Joseph here amount to the claim that their act was retrospectively okay because of how things turned out in the end? I'm not sure he's really going that far. Even the brothers don't attempt to make that argument; they freely admit what they did was criminal. Moreover this outlook runs into some theological difficulty.

For if God is, as we Christians believe, going to bring about the ultimate triumph of good, turning everything ever done toward the purpose of bringing about that triumph and finally pressing every deed in history into serving that end,³ then if evil doesn't count as evil when good comes of it, nothing that has ever been done is actually evil. This claim would be severely at odds with a whole lot of the Bible, where God's voice in the prophets, the narratives, and in the words of Christ clearly declare that there is a very important difference between doing good and doing evil, and that which you choose does matter.

I think the key to what Joseph is really thinking in this moment comes out of the most odd-sounding thing he says: "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?" It sounds as though he is saying that to pay back his brothers for what they have done to him would be to somehow usurp God's role. In other words, it sounds like a very, very early formulation of something we don't really hear spelled out fully and directly until Jesus, and further in the writings of Paul; that is, do not repay evil for evil, it is God's place to settle the question of everyone receiving their just deserts.

When Paul says, in Romans, "Bless those who persecute you," and "Do not repay anyone evil for evil," and "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord,'"⁴ even the ancient scriptures which Paul is developing and elaborating on are still far in the future at the time of Joseph. That makes it especially surprising to see this kind of theological statement from Joseph, but here it is, right in the very first book of the Bible, the assertion that repaying his brothers for their malice would incorrectly put Joseph in the place of God.

Remembering that, and living it out ourselves, are not always easy. Maybe we can argue Joseph had it easy because by the time he is saying this he is far from his days of slavery and imprisonment and is now the second most powerful man in Egypt. Seeing the bigger picture, recognizing the good that has come as well as the evil, and offering genuine forgiveness as Joseph seems to do, are always easier in the context of things working out well, and when removed by a lot of space, time, and circumstance from the original crime.

Required as it may be by our Lord, forgiveness is, after all, hard. Sometimes distance and the passage of time are graces we are given in seeking the ability to forgive and ultimately reconcile. Of course, we also need to watch out for the temptation to keep our distance specifically as a means of holding onto a grudge! But most of all what we need is faith.

³ For an example of this sort of theological claim, see Romans 8:18-30.

⁴ From Romans 9:12-21. For Jesus himself on this subject, see Matthew 5:38-48.

We do not always feel, as Joseph did, that good has come in the end. But we also haven't *reached* the end. Our faith tells us, when we listen to it, that the distance in Joseph's change in circumstance from abandoned prisoner to Pharaoh's top advisor is as nothing when compared to the distance between the miseries we may suffer today and the life promised us in the resurrection.⁵

God's providence and God's forgiveness of us are what make our own forgiveness of one another possible. It is because we have experienced grace that we can extend it to others. And when we struggle to do so, it is here that we hope for the gift of faith.

May God build and maintain that faith, and pour out on us the ability to share forgiveness freely.

Amen.

⁵ Paul says something along these lines, contrasting the greatness of what will overcome our present circumstance with what we presently endure, in Romans 8:18.