

Genesis 42: 1-12

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, ‘Why do you keep looking at one another? I have heard’, he said, ‘that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.’ So ten of Joseph’s brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Joseph’s brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan. Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph’s brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. ‘Where do you come from?’ he said. They said, ‘From the land of Canaan, to buy food.’ Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, ‘You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!’ They said to him, ‘No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies.’ But he said to them, ‘No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!’

Matthew 4: 12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: ‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali, on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned.’

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’ As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

Rev. Charles Schuster

“Joseph Got to Gloat”

January 27, 2008

“I am in the place of God. As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.”

The New Testament reading, the Gospel of Matthew, very interesting text, the fourth chapter, the twelfth verse – what I think is a change in Jesus’s preaching. “When Jesus had heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee and leaving Nazareth he went and dwelt in Capernaum by the sea, a territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, that what

was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled, "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, toward the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles -- the people who sat in darkness have seen a great light, and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death light has dawned. And from that time, Jesus began preaching, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting nets into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men and women." And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him. And he went about all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every infirmity among the people." The readings today.

So we conclude this story of Joseph this morning. Joseph had dreams, could predict the future, he knew some day his brothers would bow down to him, and of course he had to tell them. And he had a coat of many colors. One of the texts suggests the coat had long sleeves. Either way, it was some coat. Given by his father, because he was his father's favorite. Joseph reminded Jacob of his first wife, who was Joseph's mother. Joseph had brothers who were jealous, they determined they wanted to kill him but instead they threw him in a pit, took the coat, killed a goat, spread the coat with the blood of the goat, told their father Joseph was dead, but still made a profit, sold him to some Ishmaelites. Joseph was taken by them as a slave to Egypt. There was an unfortunate misunderstanding with Potifer's wife, which I won't get into, because there are children present, but he was thrown in jail. He was able to interpret the dreams of a baker and a butler and he interpreted dreams of the Pharaoh – seven years of plenty, seven years of famine. Because of Joseph, Egypt rationed food the seven good years. When the famine came, they were ready for it. Joseph was given a high post in Pharaoh's government. His brothers suffered in the famine. They came to Egypt looking for food. They came to Joseph. They didn't recognize him – they bowed down to him. The dream was fulfilled. That is the story of Joseph.

Joseph got to gloat, finally. But what does it say to us about getting even, about moving up? It's important to work through this, because if we live long enough, we will have a chance to get even with people who hurt us. If we live long enough. Joseph disguised himself when he saw his sorry, pathetic brothers coming into his office, bowing down, asking for welfare. It was a rich and beautiful moment for him, at first. He got to gloat, to get even. Last church I was in, they built a Fellowship Hall, gymnasium and a kitchen, and we paid for a lot of it by selling these little bricks, and you could put your name on the bricks, and they put all the bricks – lots of bricks – in a courtyard area with names of church members. We accumulated quite a few bricks in the patio area near the Fellowship Hall. I'd been at that church fourteen years. Some of the people who had their names on the bricks had been a source of irritation to me. Every now and then, one of them will show up here. So, every so often, when nobody was looking, I liked to go out into the courtyard and find the name of a church member whose behavior in the church

made me prematurely old, and when nobody was looking, I'd spit on their brick. It was a way of getting even. I found it moderately satisfying.

There are ways of getting even, and you might think, given this revealed perversity in my disturbed and flawed character, that you would want to lock me out of the Columbarium when it's finished, for obvious reasons. But Joseph's story tells us, getting even never does. Being kind always will. Tony Campolo ran for Congress in 1976. He won the primary but he lost in the general election, and between the primary and the general election, his political party invited him to Washington for an orientation. A member of his party grilled him, and he Campolo thought he was having to deal with barbs and innuendoes beyond the line that was acceptable, and so he said to his questioner, "What's going on here? Maybe you don't like it that I'm a Baptist preacher. Do you think because of that I can't be an adequate politician? Is that the problem?" The response was memorable. He looked at Tony and said, "Mr. Campolo, you completely miss the point. The fact that you are a Baptist preacher leaves no doubt in my mind that you're a good politician. What I'd like to know is, do you have any ethics?"

People who spend their lives trying to get even often lose their ethics. People who look for ways to settle the score on some old and mostly forgotten dispute will do things that will often make matters worse. Jim Wallace in his book *God's Politics*, he says, "Neither party has it right. The conservative right gets it wrong, and the liberal left, they don't get it at all." Everything is reduced to labels, and labels quickly lead to libel, and the lie is told, and the truth is lost. When everyone is put down, no-one is lifted up, and there's nothing good about that. It's like the seven-year-old son of a Baptist preacher who decided to baptize the two cats. He filled the bathtub with water and commenced to perform the ritual. The first cat was a kitten, didn't much know what hit it, was dunked and in and out before it even realized what happened. The other cat was a large tomcat who wanted no part of this strange ritual. And as the boy took the cat into the water, it hissed and fought and clawed up his arm, and the result was, it only got the top part of the cat's head just a little bit wet before the cat ran away. The kid, in a statement of absolute exasperation and a spirit of vindictiveness, and an attitude that said to get even, called out in disgust, "Fine. Be a Methodist. We'll see where your sorry eternal soul ends up."

Of course we're here to say that there are worse things than being a Methodist. Getting even never does, being kind always will. Joseph learned it. "Do not fear me," he said. "As you meant evil for me, God meant it for good." I love the story that's told by the Catholic theologian William Bosch, about a father and son who were walking through an area in Baltimore where they lived. It was a particularly depressed neighborhood. They had been walking for a long time, and they were tired and hungry, and so they decided to find a pay phone. They didn't have their cell phones. They wanted to call a local pizza parlor and order a pizza to be delivered to their house just after they got there. A homeless man approached. "Can you spare some change?" he said. The father reached into his pockets and pulled out two hands full of coins and held them out to the street person and said, "Here, take what you need." Well, the man looked at the coins and he said, "I'll take them all, thank you." The father and son resumed their journey to find a pay phone and it was only after a few steps that the father realized he'd given away all his

coins. He had no money for the phone call, and he turned around and called out to the homeless man, who was walking away, but hadn't gotten very far. "Pardon me, I need to make a phone call. Can you spare some change?" And the homeless man turned and held out his hands full of coins and said, "Here, take what you need." Kindness is the only way to get even, for kindness reverses the cycle of wrong. Encourage a process of following goodness with mercy. Or as Maya Angelou said in her book *Amazing Peace*, "Into the great religions of the world we jubilate the precious advent of trust. We shout with glorious tongues the coming of hope. All the earth's tribes loosen their voices to celebrate the promise of peace. We angels and mortals and believers and non-believers look heavenward and speak the word aloud. Peace, my brother. Peace, my sister. Peace, my soul."

Earl Hunt is a bishop of the church, and toward the end of his life he was reflecting upon his ministry and on the future of the United Methodist Church, and he wrote a book entitled, *A Bishop Speaks His Mind*. He said, "The plain fact is that sermons through the centuries have had their greatest power when they've been preached by good men and women, people whose own lives quietly but surely mirror the gospel of which they spoke." And it was John Knox who said, "When I think about the people in ministry who have helped me most, I think not of the gifted, but of the good." Getting even never does. Being kind always will. Joseph took a lifetime to learn it, to become kind, but he learned it, and so can we.

The second lesson, I think, for me, the story of Joseph teaches us, has to do with getting ahead. He was upwardly mobile. He got ahead in a big way, because of what he knew. But he learned how getting ahead is really falling back unless it's making others better, because getting ahead is moving forward only when we're making others better as well. Joseph said to his brothers, "I will provide for you." It was a most important turn in his life. He began for the first time in his life to see his life as part of a bigger whole. He understood the words of Virginia Burden, who said, "Cooperation is the thorough conviction that nobody can get there unless everybody gets there." It's so important to know, it takes all of us to make each of us what any of us can become. So evident that no one of us can rise above all of us without each of us doing some heavy lifting. Albert Camus said, "To grow old gracefully is to pass from passion to compassion, and the most important passion is the passion for people."

The most important way to get ahead in the faith of the Christian is to be willing to sometimes be left behind. The most important way in which to be right sometimes is to allow people to think you're wrong. We've got the example given us. Jesus, upward mobility led him to the cross. As somebody said, "That's an example for us, but what good is having someone walk on water, if you don't have anybody to follow his footsteps?" It's not about me, it's about who came before me, and who's with me now, and who comes after me. It's in the words of Chief Seattle, the wise native American philosopher, who said, "Every shining pine needle, every sandy shore, every mist in the dark woods, every meadow, every humming insect, all are holy. In the memory and experience of my people, this we know. The earth does not belong to us. We belong to

the earth, and all things are connected like the blood that unites us all. We did not weave the web of life, we are merely a strand in it.”

The New Testament reading this morning, I think, is just shocking, I think it’s an incredible turn of events in the time of Jesus’ life, a point of his upward mobility, it is then that he stopped and looked at his future. John was arrested. That was a pivotal point in his life. He was put on trial, and eventually he was executed, John was. It was then that Jesus realized, and I think for the first time, that he was part of something. They said his sermons changed in tone. He began preaching what John had preached. Some would probably have asked him, “Are you John the Baptist? You preach forgiveness of sins. You sound like John. Are you a follower?” And we have no record of his answer to that kind of question, but if we did, I think we would have heard him say, “Have you heard John preach? I am his disciple. I am part of what he started.” John made Jesus a better person. Jesus makes his followers better people. Getting ahead is falling back, unless it makes others better.

Ten days ago we had our all-church conference. It was one of the worst church meetings, I think, I have ever attended in thirty-seven years. Fortunately, not very many of you came. Fortunately, the district superintendent sent someone else to conduct the meeting, or your three appointed clergy would be packing up our books. I have always thought that those meetings were so dull that we had to do something to make them interesting, and I tried. I decided that, instead of the clergy reading our year-end reports, which could be kind of, you know, stale, that we would line up, the five of us, and do a collective report through word association. I think the five pastors you have here represent the best clergy staff team I think I’ve ever seen. I think so. Each of us a different seminary. We each like each other, we each have made, I think, a contribution. Each clergy person talented and creative, each of us in our own way. I thought we could put together a report that would be fun and inspirational, five of us lined up here in the front of the congregation ten days ago. The first clergy would say a word, the next one would follow with a subsequent word, it was to be magnificent, it was absolutely terrible. Word association? A one point I said “antidisestablishmentarianism” because I was frustrated with where it was going. Someone else said, “supercalifragilisticexpialidocious.” Which is a whole lot better than we were thinking to say.

And fortunately, the pastor in charge of the meeting told us, finally, to stop. We are five gifted clergy, I think that, individually. But together as a group we are incompetent and dysfunctional, and an embarrassment to the church. And I’m saying this, and we all agree. Some of us didn’t want to come back to the church the next day. Some of us considered changing denominations. None of us could sleep. But I can tell you, the middle of this month, the five of us are going to be locked up in a room and we’re not coming out until we get ourselves together. No one of us was at fault more than any of the rest of us. I’m reminded of the words of Casey Stengel, who managed the worst team in baseball when they lost a game 26 to 1, a reporter asked him about the reason for the loss and he said, “It was a team effort.” I’m also reminded of the words of the great theologian Reinhold Niebuhr who said, “Ultimately considered, evil is not done so much

by evil people as by good people who do not know themselves.” I want to tell you, we’re going to get to know ourselves as a group of five. You deserve better.

When I think about the time that I’ve been here, and I think about with pride the accomplishments that have been made, we’ve done some great things. We’ve renovated the sanctuary, we’ve made the Christian Education classes an environment that kids love to come to Sunday School, we’ve renovated the chapel and the donation of a new organ for the chapel, and purchased a new old van, we’re bringing people to church who couldn’t be here otherwise. We have an adult education program that’s as good as it gets, and we’re sending people all over the world through LAMP. We put a chair lift in, we built a south entrance with an elevator so our building is accessible, we’re building a columbarium, we’re dreaming of building a family life center. I’m really proud of what we’ve done. And I get credit for absolutely only one thing. When they took the cross down from the sanctuary to redo the ceiling, I asked that they put it up a little higher so we could see it a little better, and they did. Otherwise I want you to know that I made no contribution to the plans, or the carrying out of those plans. My job has been, for the past four and a half years, to take people on tours in the building and to brag and boast about what a great church this is, because I think it. And when my predecessor Jim Cowell comes around, to let him know how important he was, and is, to the future of our church, and all those leaders he worked with to design this plan. It is a great satisfaction to watch the dream come true, but it’s not my dream, it’s your dream. It’s not about me, it’s about you, it’s about who was here before, and it’s about who’s going to come after we’re gone.

I think the best we can do for our church, we will do as long as each of us thinks what is best for the rest of us. I think it’s true in life. We will go far in this world if we can forego the concern about how far we go, and focus ourselves on moving everybody forward. We will be able to climb the ladder of success only if we remember the people who are holding the ladder while we climb, and invite them to join as we ascend together. Our job is not to shine, but to provide enough light in the dark so others can see. Our job is not to rise to the top and be the best at what we do, but in being the best that we can be, helping others be better than they would have been.

We’re best known as learners, not the learned, for what good is knowledge if we don’t know how to share it? Bill Cosby is a comedian, he’s written several books. Some of those books are humorous. The most recent book is not a book that’s particularly humorous. He is speaking to his people, the African-American community, and he is saying, in the title of the book, “Come on, people, move from becoming victims to become victors. And in that addressing his people he says something relevant to all people. He says, “We must not forget to look out for each other.” Getting ahead is falling back unless it makes other better than they would have been. It took Joseph a lifetime to learn it, but he did, and so can we. We know the story of Joseph, we’ve thought about the coat, and the goat, and the day he got to gloat. Getting even never does, being kind always will. Getting ahead is falling back. Making others better is best. At the end of life he could look back at what he learned, and he was at peace with himself and with his family. His name was Joseph. That is a form, if you look it up, of the word Jahweh, which is a word for God, one of the words, I am that I am, Jahweh, that’s the derivation

of the name Joseph. Joseph wasn't God, but I think it's important to note that the one we call the Son of God had a father. The one we call the Son of God had a father. The one who was the father of the one we call the Son of God, whom do you suppose he was named for?