

Sermon February 24, 2019

GENESIS 45:3-11, 15; PSALM 37:1-12, 41-42; 1 CORINTHIANS 15:35-38, 42-50; LUKE 6:27-38

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I guess it's kind of a given that the Bible contains a number of great stories about forgiveness. The Parable of the Prodigal Son leaps to mind – one of the great stories from Luke in which a father repeatedly forgives both his younger son, who first demanded then squandered his inheritance, and then the jealousy and accusations of his older son.

Another great one is the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau, Long estranged since Jacob stole Esau's birthright with a mess of potage, they meet with all their flocks and families on the banks of the Jabok river. Jacob is so profoundly fearful of how Esau will greet him that he bows to the ground seven times as he draws near his brother, but Esau *runs* to meet and embrace him. "Truly, to see your face is like seeing the face of God,"¹ are Jacob's moving words in response to his forgiving brother.

And of course the Book of Genesis contains an entire novel on the theme of forgiveness in the great Joseph stories, from which we've heard today. Our first reading brings us to the moment of their reconciliation in the house of the Pharaoh in Egypt when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers for the first time. The Genesis account is deeply moving. The preceding verses tell us that he weeps so loudly that the Egyptians and all Pharaoh's household could hear him.

¹ Genesis 33:10

On the surface, Joseph has no reason to forgive his brothers. The story is likely familiar enough – both from the Bible and from Andrew Lloyd Webber’s enduring musical ‘Joseph And The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat’ – that most of us will recall that because of Joseph’s offensive dreams and their father’s favouritism, his brothers had taken him far out into the fields and thrown him in a pit planning to kill him, but then were talked into merely selling him into slavery in Egypt instead. When he meets his brothers again in Egypt years later the tables have turned and Joseph has both the provocation and the means of returning the favour. As Governor of Egypt he could easily have them punished, imprisoned, enslaved, and/or killed in any number of ways. If he had done that, we might think they had got their just desserts. The tale could still have become a mighty Egyptian myth of how Joseph overcame all kinds of adversity to become Governor of a foreign country, vanquishing his evil brothers. The corresponding myth in Canaan would have been that of how Joseph’s rid their family of an arrogant dreamer, mercifully selling him into slavery rather than putting him to the death he so rightly deserved.

And yet Joseph forgives. First Joseph forgives and then his brother follow suit. Like the other stories I’ve mentioned, it’s an unforgettable example of what Jesus calls on His disciples to do in His Sermon On The Plain, from which we heard today: Joseph

forgives his enemies. It's unmistakable that he loves his enemies in fact, and does every good thing he can think of to help them. He could easily have held onto his anger and shed their blood in return for their hateful behaviour. Who knows what bloodshed and violence might have come from that? But Joseph's forgiveness breaks that cycle of retribution once and for all, as of course did that of Esau, and the Prodigal Father, and others.

It's very striking that all of these examples involve brothers. Some might see that as pointing to a propensity of brothers especially, or of men in general to be in conflict with one another. Perhaps there's some truth to that although I'm not sure that is the point the story itself is getting at. We could likely find examples of sisters, or brother/sister rivals if we look.

It's interesting to note though, that the enemies Joseph, Esau, and the Prodigal Father forgive are *family*. I'm pretty sure that most of us would *not* immediately think of family members when we hear Jesus exhorting His disciples to love, forgive, pray for, and do good by their *enemies*. It's quite a powerful point though. Hurts like these often run deep in families. The cycle of hurt often crosses generations. This is very much the case the Joseph story. His father Jacob was, as we've seen, estranged from his family because of his conflict with Esau. Forced to flee, he is tricked into marrying Leah whom he did not prefer and then labour a further seven years before could marry Rachel who was

his favourite. Jacob favours Joseph over his brothers because he is the son of the favoured wife Rachel, while they are born of the unfavoured Leah. This leads to Jacob's gift of a costly coat, of the kind worn by the king Tamar, to Joseph's dreams of the brothers bowing down, to their persecution of Joseph, and so on. Really if you read the Book of Genesis, this brief outline I've mentioned, ain't the half of it – if you'll permit me that expression. It is most telling that the cycle of dysfunction continues until Joseph breaks it by choosing to love and forgive his enemy/brothers in their hour of need.

It would be wonderful to think that intergenerational dysfunction of this kind is only to be found in ancient times, or only in biblical epics. It's likely though that if we took the time to consider, most of us could think of one or two examples from our own families of unfortunate conflicts that might have passed between siblings and/or across generations, often in *spite* of the best intentions of those involved. It's helpful to see that the bible witnesses this human struggle in our families, at a high level of sophistication in fact, and that in our Christian faith we are offered powerful medicine, if only we will take it, and find it in our hearts to love our enemies, pray for them, promote their well being, forgive them seventy times seven times, and find it in our hearts to begin the process ourselves.

It would be extremely naive to think that this is easy though, for any of us. It most definitely is not. Although these stories of forgiveness cannot but awaken in us some of our most hopeful emotions, they are anything but sentimental. When we look at the biblical witness we see that it is always the very strongest people who lead the way on this. Powerful forces both within us as individuals and outside of us in the social sphere work against the very idea of loving enemies. Such mechanisms as the fight or flight response built into our brains' amygdala prompt us to fight back when we are threatened, very much preceding the capability of our higher brains for sober second thought. Loving enemies is not at all something we are born with. None of our instincts will prompt us toward it. Loving enemies needs to be consciously chosen and assiduously cultivated through spiritual work. I'm inclined to think that this is best done in communities founded for the purpose, like this one for example. Perhaps the birth of this higher self through spiritual work is what Jesus means when He calls on us to be born again, or 'born from above.'

But of course, as we all know it is not just between brothers or in families that this cycle of conflict and enmity occurs. Not by any means. It *infects* us at every level and in every sphere of human interaction. One thinks of the Arab-Israeli conflict, 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland, and so many other examples both great and small. The great anthropologist Rene Girard uses the term

contagion to describe it. If we are not careful to love our enemies, we *catch* the conflict from each other. In his view, the biblical witness has an insight to offer: to be in conflict is to be drawn into a relationship of *doubles* with our adversaries. The step by step escalation of conflict, one acting in a kind of imitative response to the other, can lock us together. We become 'brothers' in that way if you will. Perhaps this explains the biblical preoccupation with brother/enemies.

In Girard's view, we begin to catch the contagion when we lose awareness of the tenth commandment, when we begin to want what our neighbour wants. We begin to model our desires on the desires of those around us. It seems perfectly innocent at first. We notice one day that our neighbour has a beautiful ox. She seems to find such happiness in the beauty of her ox. It makes her life so much better. It seems only natural for us to want one too, so we go in search. Lo and behold we find one that is so much *more* beautiful than that miserable bag of bones in our neighbour's yard that *they* begin to covet (which just means she wants) *our* ox, and so a struggle begins. It escalates from wanting *an* ox, to wanting *our* ox or *their* ox, but after awhile our offendedness leads us to such tunnel vision about the whole thing that we lose sight of oxen all together. It becomes about each other. We become brothers in a conflict. It becomes about winning. One must get the object of mutual desire, while the other must lose it. Eventually it could become a struggle to

eliminate one another altogether. In Girard's view, this imitation of each other's desires, or mimesis is among the powerful forces that shape human conflict – and human culture – throughout our history.

It is perhaps Girard's greatest insight that the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are particularly insightful in this aspect of human nature. The scriptures not only understand human conflict at a breathtaking level of sophistication, most importantly they offer a solution. It is an especially powerful solution for human beings because it is much more than an idea, an insight, or an explanation. The scriptures offer us a *person* – a neighbour, a brother – whose desires we can imitate and *not* be drawn into conflict. On the contrary, when we as individuals come to take Jesus as our model, our imitation of His desires draws us together in a completely new, and much holier spirit than that which locked Cane and Abel together in deadly conflict. Our desires change. We begin gradually to be set free from the desires of our neighbour. In Christ we see a being much more beautiful than our neighbour's ox will ever be. It's not an overnight or instantaneous thing. We're still struggling with it after 20 centuries after all. But gradually we become free to choose as individuals to enter the Kingdom of God's desires. As Jesus did, we begin to want what God wants. Deep in our hearts we know, if the bible is anything to go by, that God wants us very much to love our enemies.