

“Making Peace in the Family”  
Rev. Chuck Cary  
First Presbyterian Church – Southampton  
September 17, 2017

Genesis 50: 15-21

Forgiveness is hardly a rational thing. It is however, a divine gift, calling forth our reach and practice.

Joseph had every reason to hate and revile his brothers. Here at the end of Genesis we look back on his story of betrayal, and it's easy to say: He had every reason to hate and mistrust his own family. They had alienated him with their jealousy. Their father Jacob had treated him as the favorite, awarding him the bright coat of many colors. All this infuriated his siblings. They hatched a plot to get even – they kidnapped him – at first intending to throw him in a hole to die. They then have second thoughts and sold him to a caravan of merchants heading to Egypt. They sell him as an ordinary slave. They return to the father and report that Joseph had been killed by a lion – a big conspiracy – a big lie. Yes – Joseph had every reason in the world to avenge his family's injustice. He had every reason in the world to hate them. Like the testimony time following many trials and convictions where families of the innocent dead confront the killer with furious scorn. Most of us understand. It is a natural response.

Then the tables turn – and they meet again.

At this point in the narrative – Joseph's brothers fully expect his wrath. Or at least his grudge. Their question: What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him? What if he does? – This post funeral encounter could end badly, very badly. So they approach him with what I imagine to be a sheepish tone of voice – hat in hand, trying to make themselves small – as least threatening as possible. And they say: “Your father gave this instruction before he died. Say to Joseph, I beg you - forgive the crime of your brothers...” The encounter is tense – anxious.

What does he do?? He weeps. He weeps. He tears up, and convulses in grief. He sheds tears of reconciliation. He reconnects with these brothers, letting go of his grudge and in its place embraces them as the family he had been missing! And he goes one step further, saying “Do not be afraid. You may have intended harm to me. God intended it for good!” Joseph reassured them – speaking kindly. All hostility had evaporated and in its place – a peace that passes understanding. Who knew? Who, could have predicted? Joseph and his brothers making peace! Who knew?

A pastor friend and I had a pretty serious falling out. It was so serious that we stopped speaking. Our body language must have been really interesting whenever we were in the same room at the same meeting. He at one corner of the table. I at another. Speaking past one another. No eye contact. No lingering at the end. Both of us busy, too busy to hang around and share stories. The cause of this ruptured relationship was less one person's fault – and more a perfect storm of circumstances. I've replayed their sequence hundreds of times: Hindsight is always 20/20. I wish I had made a phone call that could have made for a different outcome. I wish we could have found a way to reconcile. I wish our last conversation had been tempered by grace rather than hostility. It wasn't, and lots of time went by before last Tuesday when he came to First Presbyterian for the first time, making the gestures of peace. Was it awkward? You bet. Was it a perfect illustration of today's Scripture? Not exactly. Did the readings from the lectionary – the scheduled passages for today's worship influence our meeting? Yes, they did. I realize, perhaps both of us do - -that if you have a complete falling out – you can also – with God's help, have a “falling back in”!!

Jesus says: “You have heard it said: an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth – But I say unto you – if anyone forces you to go one mile – go also the second.” He also says: “You have heard it said, love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you - Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you! “It's not easy, what He describes. It is Christ-like. It is an ethic which is key to building a more peaceful world – a more

peaceful life. Joseph said: “Have no fear – I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” – In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them!!

Back to those post-trial testimonies. I will never understand the mind of those who murder out of a sense of pre-meditated hate. I will never understand the inexcusable, wanton violence of Dylan Roof – the young man who shot up the Mother Emanuel church meeting in prayer in Charleston, South Carolina. I will never accept the explanations – that he had a rotten childhood, or came under the influence of neo-Nazi beliefs. How he lied to gain entrance – how he exploited the good graces of God’s people in worship! It makes me angry and indignant just to think about the tragedy of that June massacre. There’s a part of me which is vindictive –seeking his punishment, wanting him to suffer according to the suffering he caused.

The day came for family testimony. Relatives of those he murdered had the chance to speak. They had their chance to reveal the pain and suffering Dylan Roof caused. They wept openly as they describe their loved ones.

One woman astonished everyone gathered in that courtroom. She had trouble maintaining her composure. In halting, uneven words – she reminded herself mostly of what she had learned from the Bible. She had learned the necessity of forgiveness. Though she could barely look at this warped child of God – she offered a tentative, but sincere word of forgiveness, stunning those who listened. Wow.

Let no one think her grief is any less. Let no one suggest that her adjustment is any easier. Let no one be naïve. There are tears every time a hymn reached into her heart. But, she did what others find impossible.

I don’t know about you, but I find the Bible challenging me with stories of the unlikely, the surprising, the astonishing grace of God! Stories like that of Joseph and his brothers, like that of Jesus and His cross. Stories which reveal the possibility of peace in our hearts, in our day, in our lives.

Such peace is a divine gift. Accept it, and all manner of things are possible. All manner of things indeed. Amen.