

Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church

5/5/2024

Luann Yutzky

I will meet you there

Genesis 45:3-11,15

Luke 6:27-38

I hardly know what to do with the teachings of Jesus this morning, teachings so countercultural 2000 years later and countercultural then, maybe the people listening didn't know what to do either. In a world of suspicion and disrespect, violence as the default in how to communicate in so many contexts, where do we even begin to take in the words of Jesus here on the Sermon on the Plain? Matthew's Jesus preaches from the mountaintop, the Sermon on the Mount and Luke's Jesus comes down and preaches on the level ground. He meets us on the prairie. Luke is the Kansan's version.

We have a snapshot story of family dysfunction from Genesis and confusing words from Luke this morning.

I was reminded of part of a poem of Rumi, the 13th century Persian poet,

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

I'm wondering if we can meet in that field this morning as we look at the scriptures before us together.

For those who will listen, Jesus says, the faces before him that knew hardship, that knew oppression and being cast out, the people who had just heard the words before this of, "Blessed are *you* who are poor, Blessed are *you* who are hungry now, blessed are *you* who weep now, Yours is the kingdom of God, you will be filled, you will laugh again." Blessed are *you* who struggle to live out of the new identity you now claim of taking on, receiving the new clothes of beloved children of a merciful God.

It is you I am telling says, Jesus, to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you and your reward will be great for you are children of the Most High who is kind even to the ungrateful. The Kansas southwest wind blows through our hair as we stand there and our throats are dry and we find it hard to swallow, "What do you mean, Jesus? Why should we do that too?"

And in Genesis 45, Joseph was on a journey he did not choose. And we enter the story at the end where we see forgiveness and reconciliation and we wonder *how did he get to that point?*

He was born into a family with the gene of favoritism and the sin of trickery and deceit. He was one of the favored sons along with Benjamin from Rachel, the favored wife. Young Joseph was arrogant. He was

gifted and arrogant. His dreams showed his superiority over the brothers and he loved to tell them about them: The sheaves of grain that bowed to his sheaf of grain. The sun, moon and 11 stars that bowed down to him, including his mother and father bowing down to him...

And soon after his brothers turned on him one day in the field far from home. As they saw him coming in the distance across the fields, they first made plans to kill him and then Reuben said, "Let's not take his life, let's just throw him in a pit." He thought he could go back later and rescue Joseph.

So with a stripped Joseph in the hole nearby and his long sleeved robe on the ground next to it, the brothers ate their lunch. A caravan of camels and Ishmaelites (and that's another story of betrayal and hatred- Ishmeal and Isaac and Hagar and Sarah) came by and Judah had the idea to sell their brother for 20 pieces of silver.

Reuben must have been somewhere else because when he returned and saw that Joseph was not in the pit he tore his clothes in mourning. Lies and deceit started piling up and the plan was to kill a goat to put its blood on Joseph's robe to make it look like a wild animal had devoured him. And this deception caused Jacob, the father, much suffering and he put sackcloth on and mourned the loss of his son and could not be comforted.

Meanwhile in Egypt, Joseph had to take on a new identity as an Egyptian. He continued to use his gifts as he could and was a slave who became trusted to be head of Potiphar's house refusing again and again the advances of Potiphar's wife over a period of a couple years, demanding him to lie with her. And one time she did touch him, and Jacob fled the room. Her story changed quickly when she saw his robe in her hands saying he was the one who had violated her and Joseph was unjustly put in prison.

The world had become a cruel place to a favored Hebrew son. Where was the God of his father and mother? The God who had promised his ancestors that God would walk with them and make them a great nation, a nation that would be a light to others to join?

After being called upon from prison to interpret the Pharaoh's dream Joseph was promoted to governor and responsible for the welfare of the people as they prepared for a famine to hit the land, a famine that would affect even his family back in Israel.

And that is where we are in the story. The brothers have traveled to get food for survival. Joseph could not help himself in wanting some revenge and spoke harshly to them and suspected them to be spies, knowing they were his brothers all along. He put them in prison. Could he trust them?

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John Paul Lederach, who has worked directly with conflict and conflict transformation in violent situations and is an advocate for peacebuilding has found it helpful to invite Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace¹ as voices in tense situations and conversations. Psalm 85 transliterated from Spanish says it this way, "Truth and Mercy have met together; Peace and Justice have kissed." If there is to be reconciliation all four are needed. See where you hear the voices of each one in this story from Genesis. **Truth, Mercy, Justice and Peace.**

Joseph let the brothers go back to their home except Simeon; he had to stay. Joseph also said the brothers were to bring their youngest brother next time. He had toyed with them, putting silver and his own personal cup in their sacks of grain, accusing them of being thieves., threatening to imprison Benjamin when they did bring him to Joseph. The tables had turned. Joseph, the one who had been betrayed, now held the power.

Would he repeat the cycle and get revenge?

Is this what Jesus means when he says to do good to those who have wronged us, even our enemies?

Joseph was looking for justice and it was hard to put all the pieces together needed for any kind of reconciliation. He had the power to take their lives by accusing them of robbery. But when he saw the change in his brother Judah, remember Judah, the one who wanted to sell him to the caravan when Joseph was 17 and now Joseph is 30, when Joseph heard the anguish in Judah's voice of living with the consequences of what he had done, the mourning and depression he had caused to their father, the very deep secret he and the brothers had held for so long, he could see that Judah had changed and Joseph broke down and he cried so loudly all could hear the deep, deep agony he had carried with him all those years.

"I am Joseph."

He reclaimed his identity he had had to hide. He had an Egyptian name now. His Hebrew identity had long been buried. Joseph had grown and changed too. This horrible thing had happened and how would they go forward?

"Is my father still alive?" He didn't know. That relationship had been taken from him too.

In this story, truth and mercy did meet together after justice spoke up in Judah taking responsibility and offering his life for Benjamin's. Justice and peace could then kiss and there was reconciliation yet, for many of us we are still looking for God to appear and prosper us with all that has happened in our life. It's

¹ Image from John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile*, chapter 6, Psalm 85, transliterated from Spanish..

nice it all worked out for Joseph and all that he went through and even that he could see that God was using it all to preserve his family and not harm them.

It doesn't always end up that way. What if all voices needed for reconciliation don't show up? How do we work at forgiveness then or even in the words of Jesus in loving our enemies and pray for those who betray us?

Forgiveness is a journey and on those days we can forgive, we do not forget. That is the justice that meets with mercy as it says in Psalm 85. The pain we carry with us from our own stories is our truth. We didn't ask for it to be our pain but it is and we pick it up and carry it, sometimes leaning on others, sometimes barely crawling on the ground, the truth of it is so heavy. The sudden change in our life story we didn't see coming. The retirement years we thought we would spend a certain way didn't happen. The tough, tough memories we may carry show up whenever they show up. We own all the anger and the deep, deep loss that comes with it, those who love us are affected too.

I wonder how Joseph carried that within himself all those years alone? Betrayed by those he thought he could trust, the loss of his father who loved him, losing his Hebrew identity and culture?

There are many men and women who hold so many painful events and betrayals in many forms. A family story that happens too often in different forms is a brother betraying his brother by coercing their father in his old age to sign a farm over to him that was intended for the other. This brother already had a farm and he wanted two and it all ended up in court. Betrayal, loss, hatred?, enemies? Can brothers be enemies? Not many people knew that the brother who was betrayed went to visit the brother who had betrayed him almost every day later, visited him in the nursing home when he was dying. Was that a start of a journey of forgiveness? How did he do that? He wasn't superhuman.

“But I say to you who are listening: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you;

In her sermon, Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz Weber described mistreatment as a chain that binds us and writes from her own experience about the power of forgiveness.

“Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn't actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we're not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So, what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, 'It's okay,' is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it's saying, 'What you did was so *not* okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.'”

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Extended version of the quote not said in sermon: [Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren't controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that's worth fighting for.]”²

Forgiveness is not denial.

Forgiveness does not say it didn't matter.

Reconciliation does not always happen like it did for Joseph and his brothers. Even if we have forgiven someone, we may need to not be connected to that person in any way.

What if Jesus was telling the people on the plain that this life you are living has not been fair and you have been mistreated and persecuted. Maybe he is saying, “Do not ever forget who you are. You are a new creation and on your long journey of forgiveness, keep snipping the chains that bind you. Our stories will still be a part of us but we can hold them in a different way.

And maybe Jesus ended with a Jewish saying of, “The universe was created for you, and don't you forget it.”

We stand at the base of the mountain in that level field in front of Jesus wondering how to swallow these hard words in Luke 6 to love no matter what, along with the words from Joseph to believe that God has been working in our lives all along and will keep working for good. We stand on that level place together wondering how to equalize it all- each of our life stories and Jesus' absurd call to us to overcome.

We are to keep straining to see our Lord appearing in the midst of death and shadows like the Black plague (14th-15th century) that killed 75 million people and the English mystic, Julian of Norwich in that time, dying herself, believed in a God who said, “I make all things well, and I can make all things well, and I shall make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you will see yourself that every kind of thing will be well.”³

This was not a delusional optimism but rather an acknowledgment that there is a mystery we cannot contain or express that is of God, a God that can love in all circumstances, even in tragedy.

² <http://www.sarcasticlutheran.com/>

³ David L. Bartlett. Feasting on the Word: Year C, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration . Presbyterian Publishing Corporation. Kindle Edition.

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We don't know how God is working in us. There is a higher good that God is seeing that we probably can't. We aren't God. We are the children of a God of great mercy, freely offered to each of us. A God who sees us. A God who saw Joseph. A God who saw the brothers of Joseph. A God who hoped for all to change and grow and receive God's mercy.

There are many of us, all ages who long for and are finding it harder and harder to imagine a different world than what we have now. A world where there is a leveling of injustice, a world that can be imagined and realized. Jesus envisioned it and prepared the way for us to follow this path of upside-down living he showed to create a new community, a new world. It will take a lot of reminders from each other that God is walking with us in our life journeys and in the world's ways today. God walking with us may

come in different forms. Be open to the appearance of God in our lives as we repent, we forgive as we can, we mourn and we laugh. This is the sacred time in history we are all in together. We need each other.

"Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing
and rightdoing there is a field.

I'll meet you there.

When the soul lies down in that grass
the world is too full to talk about."

Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense. (the poet Rumi)

May we find the level fields to meet each other in- to gain strength to continue the journey that is ours.

Benediction:

Into this world we are born,

Into the beauty and sorrow of everyday life.

Into this day we awake,

Into possibility and the unknown.

Into this church we are welcomed,

Into God's grace and each other's truth.

Additional quote on forgiveness:

Dietrich Bonhoeffer in *The Cost of Discipleship* says, "We must never allow forgiveness to degenerate in cheap grace. Preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church accountability and discipline, communion without confession is grace without the cross."