

What Ministry is This?

Genesis 43:3-11, 15

We have some tremendous scripture passages before us this morning. St. Paul offers his answer to a question we've probably all asked at one time or another: How are the dead raised? The Psalmist tells us not to fret about the wicked, but to commit our lives to the Lord, and he will make our vindication shine like the light and the justice of our cause like the noonday. Then there is Jesus preaching on the plain and giving his timeless instruction: Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you; be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Each of these passages has more than enough to occupy us. But this morning I want to focus on our Old Testament story of Joseph meeting his brothers way down in Egypt-land. Here we find the great and enduring themes of the day – love, forgiveness, mercy and reconciliation.

Now, were I given the chance, I would sit down with those who composed our lectionary and talk to them about how they have dropped us right at the end of one of the Bible's most poignant and human stories: The family saga of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If you know it, you know it rivals any soap opera or movie. Each generation has its deceptions and jealousies, its betrayals and power dynamics that come and go like the recurring themes in a magnificent symphony.

Today's heart-rending meeting between Joseph and the brothers who sold him into slavery echoes another meeting a generation earlier when Jacob met Esau, the brother whose birthright he stole. And a generation before that Hagar, the slave of Abraham and Sarah submitted to the whims of her masters, bore them a child and was then cast out. But Joseph, when enslaved, rejected the sexual advances of his mistress and ended up in prison, only to rise and become the steward of Egypt.

A little context helps us see what the scripture is trying to tell us. We're at a moment between the twin poles of revenge and reconciliation, each exerting its own gravitational pull. Which way will we go?

Think of a time when you've been wronged and how much you might have thought about getting even. Who has time to think about God and turning the other cheek when revenge can be so sweet?

Frederick Buechner says that "of the seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. To lick your wounds, to smack your lips over grievances long past, to roll over your tongue the bitter prospect of confrontations to come ... In many ways it is a feast fit for a king."

Today's scripture gives us the day Joseph dreamed of. You can imagine him in his prison cell, nursing his wounds, longing for the day when he would meet his brothers. The desire could only build as he grew in stature. They sold him into slavery, expecting that would be the end of him, but now he is second only to Pharaoh. You can imagine him praying: Dear, Lord, please let them come.

Which way to go? Revenge or reconciliation? Forgiveness or condemnation? To continue the chaos and rupture of brokenness, or to say: The wounding stops here. For even though revenge may be sweet and a dish best served cold, it is also corrosive, continuing a cycle of tit for tat without end. Buechner goes on to say that the chief drawback of the kingly feast of anger and old wounds “is that what you are wolfing down is yourself. The skeleton at the feast is you.”

Now, Joseph doesn’t get up immediately from the proverbial table. He makes his brothers jump through a few hoops, but all the while love yearns to speak. Finally, one last mean trick on his brothers brings him to his senses. To continue the course he’s on could mean his father Jacob’s death, and what good then would be found in his vengeful schemes as what once tasted sweet becomes as bitter as ashes in his mouth. Brothers and sisters, there comes a time when the price of revenge is just too high.

Scripture tells us that Joseph was no longer able to control his feelings in front of his attendants and brothers. You know the feeling. Love and heartbreak builds up inside you. Twin torrents of emotion surge through your body. Your temples throb. Your pulse races. The pressure is so great you fear your eyes are going to blow out of their sockets.

Joseph orders everyone out except his brothers. Then, what happens? He cries, moans, and not just a tear or two. He wails so loudly the Egyptians outside the room and Pharaoh a distance away can hear his soul-deep weeping. He turns to his brothers, tears streaming down his face: “I am Joseph ... I am your brother, whom you sold into Egypt.”

This is the high point of reconciliation when all the pain and misery built up over years is released. Today’s story only gives us Joseph’s response. But reconciliation is not a one-way street. As they say, it takes two to tango, and two to truly reconcile. A few chapters on the brothers beg forgiveness for their crime and wickedness, even offering to become Joseph’s slaves. He rejects their offer.

“Am I in the place of God,” he says.

This story gives us the Gospel in real life: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive and you will be forgiven.

The scene played out in today’s passage is happening all over the world, wherever the victimized and their perpetrators sit down together, speak their truth and begin to heal, because both parties are wounded, both parties come to the table with fear and trembling, leaving behind the feast of anger and recrimination.

This is no easy task. Yet, it is our task for ourselves in our personal relationships and in the larger relationships of our society and our world. Now, I know you might say: “Father Thompson, why do I have to be involved in this, especially if I didn’t start it and I’m not a part of it? Why me?”

Well, brothers and sisters, St. Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians says: “God reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, for God is making his appeal through us.”

What ministry is this, you ask? It is the ministry of reconciliation. God is making his appeal through us. Reconciliation is not just a good thing, some social fad we can engage in when we please and compliment ourselves for having done so. Reconciliation is our ministry. It is an essential part of our Christian witness. And, when left unattended and unaddressed, the consequences are dire and can affect us all.

Hear Abraham Lincoln’s challenge to us during his Second Inaugural Address, and consider where we are today as a nation: “With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and for his orphan – to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves, and with all nations.”

That is the high call from March 4, 1865. With malice toward none. With charity for all. Let us bind up the nation’s wounds. Yet, we still struggle.

I was at lunch a few days ago with a fellow priest and he said a parishioner came up to him and said: “Father, if I hear the word ‘justice’ one more time, I’m going to scream and run out of the church!”

We all have times when we grow weary, or frustrated, scandalized, or totally put off. But then comes the inescapable word of God with its story of brothers torn apart by jealousy, who mend their broken relationship. And then there is his only-begotten Son who said: “Love your enemies, do good, give.”

And when we quibble, Jesus convicts us with these words: “Why do you call me Lord, Lord, and do not do what I say?” (Luke 6:46)

Yes, the hard work of ministry and reconciliation is set before us, but in doing so and by living not merely by the Golden Rule, but by God’s Rule, there is great reward, for then we will be known and recognized as children of the Most High.

Amen.

The Rev. M. Dion Thompson, delivered on 24 February 2019