

Epiphany 7, Year C .February 24, 2019 St. Augustine's in-the-Woods Episcopal Church, Freeland, WA. Nigel J. Taber-Hamilton Genesis 45:3-11, 21-28, Psalm 37:1-18 or 37:3-10, Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50, Luke 6:27-38

One day, when my brother and I were 7, and sitting in class at our school, the principal came in and asked us out. You can imagine what I was thinking: "what did I do?!" But outside was our uncle – my mother's brother – and he said we needed to come with him. He drove us home, but told us to stay in the car while he went to the doorstep, where there were two suitcases. He picked them up and we left, headed for our grandmother's house, never to return. Our parents were splitting up – getting divorced. My father had pushed my mother out the front door, and slammed it behind her. Within about an hour, some suitcases with her clothes and ours followed.

For this moment, the rest of the details of that day – and the ones that followed – don't matter much, except those revolving around our mother. For her it was a bitter, angry moment that she never really left behind, like water dammed *before* it could go under the bridge – a defining moment that she took with her to her grave. It's an old saw but a vividly true one to say that not all wounds are visible. Life is a complex journey, a mixture of wandering blindly through challenging emotional fog as much as dancing joyfully in bright sunlit uplands. Sometimes we get so lost we never find our way into the light.

We've all met lost people. Sometimes we are them. Like Marley's Ghost in Dickens' Christmas Carol we're all bound in some way or another with unseen chains, carrying heavy leaden boxes loaded with the bitter detritus of the past.

Sometimes we can get so shackled by bitter experience, unable to let go of a past moment, that it defines how we live in the present. Abuse, divorce, rejection, lost jobs, lost hopes, distrust. These dams remain, preventing us from fully making that journey into all the potential futures – especially the joyful ones – that lie out there in front of us.

I'll bet that was part of Joseph's story. How could it not be?! The Golden Boy of the family – he must have known that, and, too, of the jealousy that it provoked in his brothers. And now these brothers shockingly betrayed, rejected, and sold him into slavery! I guess jealousy's poisoned apple doesn't fall far from this family's tree – remember how their father Jacob betrayed his brother Esau?

How did Joseph feel, I wonder? I know how I'd feel: emptiness at the betrayal, and – because nature abhors a vacuum – anger that swiftly filled it.

Over the years, Joseph prospered; became powerful – *very* powerful – *life or death* powerful; a power that would make vengeance – an easily understandable vengeance – understandable, if not, from our perspective, ethically justifiable

Instead Joseph wept. He was a very different person than the obnoxious boy who his brothers hated so much. He'd clearly wrestled with his demons, the way his father did at the Ford of Jabok. Self-knowledge brought with it a willingness to let go of the past, to abandon those leaden boxes that might have prevented him from forgiving and instead to say, "I love you anyway, in spite of it all." And, in fact, to be able to see the hand of God in the experiences of suffering he had, and to value them as vehicles to love and compassion. Anger's harsh shackles are broken, and now the thing that defines Joseph is his love, because love was the thing – perhaps the only thing – that could have broken those bitter chains. It is Joseph's love that makes reconciliation possible, that brings the family back together. It is his love that is the ultimate hallmark of humanity and the proclamation of

God's grace.

Now there can be a future. Now there can be a vision of hope and joy. Now they can laugh. Now Joseph, knowing his brothers so well, can tell them with humor as they depart, "Don't quarrel along the way."

The experience of suffering is at the heart of this and all biblical stories. Throughout the Old Testament the people of Israel continually move away from God, suffer, and return home with a new appreciation of what love and faith are all about.

It's obviously no accident that we hear Joseph's story today before we hear Jesus' words. On the "level ground" – the places of corpses, disgrace, suffering, misery, hunger, annihilation, and mourning – Jesus presents the crowd with a vision of the future. In the midst of the darkness and fog, here's a vision of what living in God's reign will be like," he's saying, "and you can bring it about if you live this way." And that way?

- If we can drop our leaden boxes, and shed our chains, then we'll find that our lives will be defined by love for others, and we will be able to act toward them out of who we are as loving and compassionate human beings, not in response to the anger and sorrow born of pain. As Joseph said: "I love you anyway, in spite of everything."
- If we can reorganize our priorities so that things are not as important as people, we will find joy.
- If we can recognize those moments in our lives when we've experienced God's mercy and forgiveness toward us, we will be able to respond to those who wrong us with understanding, grace, and forgiveness, not with condemning judgement.

Here's the thing: Jesus' words aren't addressed to some amorphous "them" whose behavior needs to change. Everything in Jesus' vision is about "us" and how we can live into joy despite the way life has treated us. Our challenge is how to live faithful lives in the here-and-now that are accountable to the future vision that is God's reign. Jesus' words show us the way, and call us to let go of the past and move into the future.

The Danish theologian Soren Kierkegaard had a blunt way of describing life: "To live is to suffer." But there's more to our stories, and the 'more' comes through the sort of faith in God and knowledge of self that Joseph displays so clearly. The 'more' for us as Christians comes back again to Paul's reminder to the Christians in Corinth: It all comes back to Easter. Easter's message is that while suffering is a central experience of living, celebration trumps it. To live is also to rejoice and to celebrate. That's a powerful, captivating promise to look forward to. AMEN.