

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany – Year C – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony – 2.20.22
Genesis 45:3-15, Psalm 37:1-12,41-42, 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50

For the last two Sunday's we've been hearing in the gospel the call to radical love. That radical love is twofold. First, we are called to love God, totally, which translates into trust, complete and utter trust, in spite of how things might appear in real time. Jeremiah spoke of it poetically, as being planted like trees beside a stream of living water in the middle of a parched and desert land. Isaiah spoke of this radical love of God as being the year of the Lord's favor. Not a year in chronological time, but a year as a time without end. If we live in the circle of trust in the God we love, we live in God's favor for that is the life God desires for us. Jesus spoke of blessings and woes, the choice we have each of us to make, between relying on our own power and relying on the power of God.

This morning we have moved from radical trust and love to radical forgiveness. Jesus tells us to love our enemies. If that were not a difficult enough concept in the abstract, Jesus makes it concrete and physical. "...do good to those who hate you...pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other cheek also. Radical forgiveness, a radical forgiveness that is tied up in the radical love of God. One cannot practice this kind of forgiveness out of one's own power. It requires something more, the power and blessing of God. An example of this radical forgiveness is told in the story we heard from Genesis, the story of Joseph and his brothers. This story is so good, that it was made into a musical: Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, winning a Tony Award for excellence in Broadway theatre. The story goes like this: In the biblical land of Caanan, Joseph is the favorite son of Jacob. As such, he encounters the jealousy of his brothers who object to his dreams in which he is the hero and the brothers have to pay homage to him. They arrange to have him killed and to prove his death, show their father the multicolored coat smeared with blood. In fact, Joseph has been sold in slavery to the household of Potiphar who has him thrown in jail as he objects to the attraction between his wife and Joseph. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams is relayed to Pharaoh who has started to have a series of dreams. Joseph foresees seven years of full harvests and this to be followed by seven years of famine. Joseph is put in charge of preparing for the years of famine and, just as prophesied, the dreams came true. Back in Caanan, the famine affected Joseph's family too. The brothers travel to Egypt to find work. They go to Joseph who recognizes them but they don't recognize him. They bow down before him (just as foretold in an earlier dream). Joseph has a score to settle though and after giving his brothers grain, he hides a goblet in Benjamin's sack. Benjamin is accused of theft. The brothers plead for Benjamin's release from custody and Joseph relents and then reveals himself as their brother.

Joseph understands that all that had happened to him and to his brothers was redeemed by God in that act of radical forgiveness that Joseph was able to practice. It was tempting to take revenge, to plant the goblet, accuse Benjamin of theft and hear their pleas for Benjamin's release. In those moments Joseph had a choice. He could listen to his human nature and get even or he could listen to God, forgive and get his family back. Joseph chose the better part.

"You will settle in the land of Goshen and you shall be near me, you and your children and your

children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have will not come to poverty..." And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."

The forgiveness that Joseph offered did not depend on his brothers being sorry, repenting, or admitting they were wrong. The forgiveness that Joseph offered depended on Joseph being willing to trust that God would bring the relationship right. It depended on Joseph being willing to freely do his part without regard to what his brothers might or might not do. If it had been dependent on the actions of another, Joseph would have continued to be held hostage. He would not have been free of the actions of his brothers that had caused him pain and suffering. He would have continued to be held in a trap of waiting for someone else to take action, something that might never happen. Joseph, surely the wronged party in this story, was willing to take the first step, a step that freed him from the bondage of what had been and enabled him to see what could be.

Notice, nowhere in this story does Joseph indicate that what had been done to him no longer mattered. He never says anything like "it's o.k." There was real hurt, real pain, and that Joseph acknowledged. He had to live through the consequences of the actions of his brothers, for only in doing so and trusting God for good could the situation be redeemed. It took time. Joseph spent time in prison, as a slave and most likely in fear for his life. He learned from the experience and changed so that he was able to meet his brothers and sincerely forgive them even before they asked. Joseph trusted God in a very dark time in his life, a time when he could not see what was to come. God walked with Joseph through it all, bringing him to a place where he could interpret the dream of Pharaoh and rise to a place of power and prominence. And out of that place of power and prominence, Joseph was able to do good instead of evil. In any situation where forgiveness is needed, the choice is to bring good instead of evil, to create instead of destroy. And the result was that Joseph regained his family and they regain their brother. The most important result is in the last line of our reading. Out of forgiveness came the ability for Joseph and his brothers to talk with one another, honestly and truthfully to shape a new relationship...until the next time forgiveness was needed.

Jesus instruction to love one's enemies is a timely reminder at a moment when the world is focused on the Russian-Ukraine border. Once again, we are witnessing brinksmanship, the reduction of the world to East and West, them and us. What would loving the enemy look like? Can the words of Jesus and the example of Joseph and his brothers offer us a way to move into a new relationship with the countries of the world? Can this simple story translate to an answer, a model for how we treat one another? Must we think in terms of power over or powerlessness as the only possibility? I don't have the answer and wiser people than I have sought an answer for centuries, but I do believe that God is showing us a way, a way that must begin with each one of us. Is there just one relationship in your life in which you might test this model? One relationship where you can choose to practice radical forgiveness, even if the other person never knows? Just one?