

Liberation – Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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In this story, Joseph, the main character, was the son of Rachel and Jacob. He was one of many sons, actually. And Joseph and his brothers lived the many ups and downs that brothers live: brotherhood, kinship, and family pride, along with rivalry, jealousy, and resentment.

Joseph appears initially as a spoiled son, favored by his doting father, proud of the pre-eminent place in the family. The father, Jacob, adds to the explosive atmosphere of the family dynamic by giving his favorite son a piece of clothing (that famous multi-colored coat) that marks his pre-eminence and by freeing him from the responsibility carried by the other sons for work with the family flocks.

The brothers succumb to sibling jealousy and seek an occasion to rid the family of their troublemaking brother. Their resolve increases when Joseph reports dreams that confirm his pre-eminence. Their anger breaks into open violence when Joseph leaves the protection of the father in order to seek out the brothers' condition. Their initial plan to kill him changes to a more economically advantageous plan to sell him to passing merchants; yet the sale is tantamount to killing him.

The merchants sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. But, Joseph rises from being a servant in a private household to a prominent position in Pharaoh's court. He becomes second in command of the entire kingdom and receives responsibility from Pharaoh to administer grain reserves in a time of famine. He had this

responsibility not only for all Egyptians but also for others beyond their borders.

Ironically, the famine forces Joseph's brothers, the ones who sold him to the merchants, to travel to Egypt to buy enough grain to sustain their families. And in Egypt, they stand unknowingly at the mercy of Joseph, whom they do not recognize but who recognizes them. And Joseph reveals his true identity to them.

With that reveal did not come the expected emotion that we might have had had we been beaten and, unbelievably, sold into slavery ourselves. The normal reaction, the reflexive human emotion in this situation, would've been anger and resentment. That's how Joseph should've reacted. He should've pounced with words of denouncement and spite, along with holding a grudge and sending his brothers away without a seed of grain to take back home with them.

But Joseph's reaction is profoundly different. His reaction is one of love and generosity. Somehow, amazingly, he's able to look past the misdeeds of his brothers and love them for who they were and what they needed in that moment. And that sentiment is crystalized in this statement that he makes to them upon the reveal: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."

Joseph did not forget what the brothers had done to him (he reminds them in this statement: "I am Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.") He doesn't pass it off as if it never happened; he doesn't have amnesia over that terrible time. But within that firm reality, he tells them that he's here to preserve them and their

family. And in the end, through kisses and tears, he reconciles with them.

The strength, the courage, the compassion Joseph has in this situation is almost unbelievable. To love them like he does is irrational. But, we admire him! And wasn't the world much better served by his generous and loving spirit!

This is the kind of love—and maybe the only kind of love—that brings people together in the most unlikely of moments.

We wonder if it's really possible for people to come together in unity in light of the division and animosity we face in our culture, in our country, and even within the greater church of Jesus Christ. We have become so polarized that we treat people with different political or ideological opinions as though they are enemies, as though they have thrown us into the pit of slavery that Joseph at one time found himself thrown into by his brothers.

In the gospel reading today, Jesus acknowledges how difficult it is to do what Joseph did and what he commands (loving your enemies and doing good to those who hate you).

And he says to the gathered crowd (and says to us) that we shouldn't take pride in loving those who are easy to love. He knocks us off our pedestals when he says, "If you love those who love you, why should you be commended? Even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to and if you lend to those who do good to you and those you expect will repay you, why should you be commended? That's easy."

"Instead, love your enemies, do good to them and lend to them, expecting nothing in return."

In other words, *our* behavior shouldn't be dictated by *someone else's* behavior. That transaction-based behavior only leads to problems.

When we return hate with hate, the original hate has won! When we return the venom that has come out of somebody else's mouth with our own venom, the evil behind that original venom has won! When we hoard from others what somebody else has hoarded from us, selfishness has won! When we think only nasty thoughts of somebody because somebody issued a bad word to us, derision has won!

In the reign of God, what we do is not directed by what others do to us. In the reign of God, what we do is a response to the God who alone fills us, the God who Jesus said "is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked" (Luke 6:35).

Joseph was so in tune with God's call on his life that he rose above the hate and persecution of his brothers. He was thrown into a pit and sold into slavery! And yet, in their time of need, he didn't do the equivalent to them. He kissed them, embraced them, and helped them.

That's nothing short than the way of Jesus.

Speaking of Jesus, is there any better example of loving your enemies than his courageous and selfless attitude upon the cross they nailed him to?

In his passion, Jesus performs the ethic he commends here. When he speaks on the cross, it is not to incite retribution but to forgive and to commend his spirit to the merciful Father he refers to in verse 36. He resists violence with self-giving love.

Jesus offers his ethic as a way for the community of his followers to resist the tit-for-tat of the present age, not to be passive in the face of it. When we live the ethic of this Sermon in the face of this world's violence, we are collectively saying to those who hate, abuse, strike, judge, and condemn, "You are not the boss of me." We are demonstrating that bad behavior cannot

goad us into reacting in kind. We are resisting the evils we deplore.

Joseph did that. And we are called to do that with the accompanying help of the Holy Spirit. Joseph depended on God in order to offer this extraordinary demeanor of forgiveness and compassion. And we can depend on it as well.

On November 17, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The title of the sermon was simply, "Love Your Enemies."

Speaking on the importance and difficulty of doing so, he says this during his sermon:

"I think I mentioned before that sometime ago my brother and I were driving one evening to Chattanooga, Tennessee, from Atlanta. He was driving the car. And for some reason the drivers were very discourteous that night. They didn't dim their lights; hardly any driver that passed by dimmed his lights. And I remember very vividly, my brother A. D. looked over and in a tone of anger said: "I know what I'm going to do. The next car that comes along here and refuses to dim the lights, I'm going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all of their power." And I looked at him right quick and said: "Oh no, don't do that. There'd be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody has to have some sense on this highway."

"Somebody must have sense enough to dim the lights, and that is the trouble, isn't it? That as all of the civilizations of the world move up the highway of history, so many civilizations, having looked at other civilizations that refused to dim the lights, and they decided to refuse to dim theirs. And [historian Arnold]

Toynbee tells that out of the twenty-two civilizations that have risen up, all but about seven have found themselves in the junkheap of destruction. It is because civilizations fail to have sense enough to dim the lights.⁸ And if somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the dim and beautiful and powerful lights of love in this world, the whole of our civilization will be plunged into the abyss of destruction. And we will all end up destroyed because nobody had any sense on the highway of history."

It's tough, really tough, but we're called with God's help to dim the lights today—dim the light of hate, resentment, and isolation, so that the dim light of love that welcomes and forgives even our enemies can be seen throughout the world.

And when we do this, we can find it to be liberating. We rise above the hate, not to boast about ourselves, but because Jesus did, and it's the way of God. And it just so happens that our anger and bitterness can be diffused. As hard as it may be to love our enemies, the yoke of resentment and revenge is loosened from around our necks. And the world around us is freed of just a tiny bit of the divisiveness that poisons us.

My son, Joey, played Joseph in *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* this past fall at Farragut High School. It was well-done—good singing and acting.

At the beginning of the show, the narrator picks Joseph out of the crowd and brings him on stage as his way of introduction to the audience. And you really get a sense that he's chosen for this moment. This is his anointing for the moment that will come his way. He's chosen to eventually practice this incredible mercy and forgiveness to his family members.

And at the very end of the show, after Joseph has done this amazing thing, that ritual is repeated. Whereas Joseph was brought onto the stage early on, now Joseph goes out into the audience and brings onstage a young boy or girl — as if anointing him or her to follow his example in the world.

That example is so hard to follow. But it's the way of God, turning on the dim and beautiful and powerful light of love in this world. And it's so liberating.