



August 16, 2020

11<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133, Romans 11:1-2a,29-32, Matthew 15:10-28

Growing up in a house with three sisters (so four kids altogether) was difficult, because invariably one of us would do something, but all of us would end up getting in trouble for it.

And we were asked, *"Who did it?"* We answered, *"I didn't do it."* The response was, *"I didn't ask who didn't do it. I asked who did...do it. You've got to listen."*

And invariably, nobody would fess up and we all got a share of the punishment 'cause nobody would tattle on the other. And so there were three folks suffering for something that somebody else did.

Does that seem just to you? (How come nobody talks about this on Mothers' Day or Fathers' Day — that's the real question?)

But that doesn't seem just, now does it? No. We expect the people who do right to prosper and the people who do wrong to be punished. And I think, for all of our lives, that idea has been reinforced. And the Scriptures certainly seem to reinforce that idea...not all of the time, right?, because we do have the Books of Job and of Ecclesiastes...this counter wisdom, this anti-wisdom.

That leads me to the point that I want to make is that: God and God's justice can be flummoxing sometimes. Because just when we think the day of comeuppance has finally come for somebody, they don't seem to get what they deserve. In some cases they get more than what they deserve...in a positive way.

Genesis 45 anticipates this dramatic revelation that Joseph is going to give his brothers: *"Hey, you know that scrawny little kid you sold into slavery? I am he."*

We've seen movies like this, yes? Where people who have done wrong, they get showed up by the very person that they victimized. And now the bully is in need of help from their victim...and we're all sitting at home eating popcorn, thinking: *"Yes, they are finally going to get it!"*

And what does Joseph do? What does Joseph do? He sobs and he says, *"Don't be sad. God sent me ahead of you."* He says this three times. *"God sent me ahead of you...to save your lives, to preserve life. So y'all go back to Canaan and get my daddy, and let's all live together here in Egypt."*

And the whiplash effect...what just happened here? We're getting insight into the character of God, the character of the God who created us and the character of the God who loves us —that God is just.

And what that means is that sometimes the justice of God, the righteousness of God, the arc does not bend toward retribution. It arcs towards reconciliation.

The Psalmist puts it like this, *“How good and pleasant it is for brethren dwell together in unity?”* And at the end of the Psalm it talks about how God has ordained the blessing, the blessing that God has ordained for all of us is that we can live together in unity...that life can be preserved...that people can live together.

And so let me say this, lest someone is at home thinking, *“Well, people don’t get punished.”*

No, I think living together in unity requires some amendment of life. Joseph’s brothers would not be able to take credit for what they did, because he said, *“God is responsible for this, not you.”* And they had to leave Canaan and move to Egypt. It requires an amendment of life.

There can be no reconciliation without repentance...and there can *certainly* be no reconciliation without repentance and an attempt at making amends whenever that is possible.

So, we cry out for justice for Breonna Taylor and for all of those who’ve been hurt by racial injustice and police brutality. But we must remember, as Christians, that the justice that we seek is not retribution, it’s reconciliation.

How was the community brought back together? What makes for life? And that doesn’t mean that wrongdoers get to walk off scot free. But that is a means to an end. It is not the end in and of itself. It’s reconciliation. Because there will always be one more battle to fight. There will always be one more story.

What we must work together for is reconciliation.

*“But I don’t see why I have to do all that. I didn’t do anything wrong.”* Paul says in Romans that the plan of God how it plays out is a great equalizer. Because ultimately everyone ends up dependent on the mercy of God. And it didn’t matter if one was Jewish or not.

Everybody is in need of the mercy of the just God. Everyone is in need of the kind of mercy that Joseph demonstrates when he has the power to execute...but doesn’t use it. He uses that power to bring life.

Yes, it was wrong what his brothers did. Yes, God saw it and God heard those cries and those prayers that Joseph made. But at the end of the day, the plan of God was to sustain life...by showing mercy.

That is the true justice of God as it plays out. That’s what God is all about.

And I think that is what Jesus is getting at when talks to the Pharisees and scribes at the beginning of our Gospel for today...that while the Pharisees and the scribes are talking about hand washing, there is a woman, a Canaanite woman, in need of the help of Jesus. And had Jesus listened to them, they would not have had him speak to her.

Now to be fair, Jesus does say, *“Hey, look lady, it’s not right for me to give the children’s bread to dogs. I’ve been sent to the lost sheep of Israel. You’re not an Israelite. Really I am not here for you.”*

And I think that is how Jesus illustrates his point: Is that the mercy of God embraces everybody! That if God executed the kind of justice that we think is justice, people who are in need of God's love would not even receive it.

Jesus opens the door for this woman's child to be healed, as God opens the door for us all to be healed...from all of the hurts and all of the pain.

Yes, we seek justice. As Christians, as humans, as Americans, we want justice, but not at the expense of living together in unity. It is hard work. It is work that I have done myself in repairing human relationships. I know the weight of it. And I can tell you that that is not living.

Experience the justice of God by finding the path that leads to reconciliation, the path that leads to life.

For that is the blessing that God has ordained for you and for me.