

Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-12, 42-42
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

Epiphany 7C
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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To Love As God Loves

Some of you know that I don't choose the scripture passages we hear on Sundays, the passages we read and I reflect on in my sermons. Those passages were determined long ago and they are the bane and delight of preachers who are tied to the lectionary, this book that has all of our readings in it. Sometimes the lectionary makers put things together in a methodical, read through the chapters sort of way, and other times because passages work together or follow a shared theme or at the very least, hold some common thread. So when I decided to look at all of the scripture passages for the season of Epiphany – yes, we are still in Epiphany and will be until Lent, today's Old Testament reading was a surprise to me. All throughout the season we've been reading from the Old Testament prophets, hearing God's Word through their voices. And then comes today's reading from Genesis. Genesis? That seemed random.

Epiphany is the season of the manifestation of Jesus as the Christ, and our scripture passages manifest that manifestation, hopefully making it visible and clear for us. Epiphany is often called the season of light, the season when we focus on Jesus as the light of the world and focus on bringing our own light into the world too. Epiphany is also the season of illumination, of discovery, of sudden recognition or understanding. I know some of us have had significant epiphanies, some of them religious and some of them not. Surely we've all had little epiphanies, those wonderful "aha" moments where things fall in to place and something important is revealed. The scripture we've been listening to in this Epiphany season has been chosen to help us see who Jesus really is and the reality that he came among us, at least in part, to make visible the Kingdom of God. So how is it that a one-off reading from Genesis – the book of creation, the book of the beginning of God's people – Adam, Eve, Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, Leah, Rachel, Joseph and his brothers - the book of ancient salvation stories from what seems like the beginning of time - how is it that this bit of this story is our reading today? The Gospel I understand. It clearly makes visible the Kingdom of God. Many of you have heard it before - Love your enemies, turn the other cheek, forgive and you shall be forgiven, do not judge and you won't be judged, do to others what you want done to you. Those bits of scripture float around in our culture and are spoken by many who never, ever read the Bible. One doesn't have to be a Christian to recognize the Golden Rule, even if you do attribute it to Shakespeare rather than to Jesus.

And while this passage makes manifest the Kingdom of God, it has also been used to control and oppress – things that have no place in God's Kingdom. Today's reading is a continuation of the sermon on the plain and follows those beautiful and stark beatitudes we heard last week. It's important to remember that, to remember that these seemingly innocent words come from Luke, the one who sets

Jesus firmly on the side of the oppressed and the marginalized and makes a mess of things for the comfortable and complacent.

We need to listen very carefully to the content as well as the context of Jesus' words because if we aren't careful, we will hear things that aren't there. We may hear that our good works and kindnesses are enough to get us our own life of good and kindness. Don't judge and you won't be judged. Don't condemn and you won't be condemned. Forgive and you'll be forgiven Jesus says, and if we take that as a list of things we need to do to get in to the Kingdom of Heaven, then we have sorely misunderstood. There is nothing we can do to make God love us and there is nothing we can do to make God not love us. God loves because love is who God is. God loves the street people and the drug addicts and the starving children and the abusers and the thieving financiers and the pedophiles just as God loves you and me. And what Jesus was saying to his followers then, and is saying to us now, is that we are to do the same. That doesn't mean we should condone horrific behavior or unjust treatment of God's people. It is to say if there is any possibility at all those sinners might repent, it will only be because of God's boundless and unconditional love. It's their only hope. And as it turns out, it's our only hope too. The best thing we can possibly do to help in the face of unspeakable injustice, is to pour out God's expansive and unconditional love.

Jesus speaks to us of an ethic of generosity which is essential for making God's Kingdom visible, and what we need to realize is that if we don't live that way, the Kingdom of God actually will NOT be visible. Yes, I know it sounds crazy. It's the sort of talk that got Jesus crucified. The Kingdom of God Jesus made visible was so radical and so powerful that he had to be done away with so the occupiers and oppressors could continue to occupy and oppress. You see, Jesus wasn't simply describing a list of behaviors we are to enact in order to be good people or even to find favor with God. What he IS describing is the way we must live in order for God's Kingdom to be visible in the world. It's tempting only to look to ourselves, to fuss about how good we are or aren't, to see how many of those Golden Rule bits we can check off our list.

But that isn't the point.

While it's true that loving generously is the only natural response to a boundlessly loving God, it's not the only point. The evidence of God's love, of God's Kingdom come among us can only be made manifest when we love as God loves, without expectation, without condition, without concern for the outcome, without hope for a payback or reward. This is the sort of life Jesus wants for us AND for the world. Jesus wants us to love unconditionally because of what it does for us. Even for the ones who have been hurt at the hands of their enemies, who have been unjustly judged, who have been killed because they turned the other cheek, the only response is to love more. Not to condone, but to love more.

And that, my dears, is why we get the end of Joseph's story today. Do you know it? Joseph was the child of his father's old age and his father loved him more than any of his brothers. And because of that, Joseph's brothers hated him. From what we can glean, Joseph behaved a bit like the spoiled little brother and that didn't help. To make matters worse, Joseph dreamed dreams and the first dream he

told his brothers was this: *“We were binding sheaves in the field, and, look, my sheaf arose and actually stood up, and, look, your sheaves drew round and bowed to my sheaf.”* Well, that didn’t win him any points. *“Do you mean to reign over us and rule us?”* the brothers asked. *And they hated him all the more.*

It gets worse, with the sun, moon and stars bowing down and Joseph not having the good sense to stop telling these dreams to his angry brothers. Then one day their father Jacob wanted to know how his sheep-herding sons were faring out there in the fields and so he sent Joseph out to find them and to bring back news of them.

When the brothers saw Joseph approaching, they made a plan. They sold him as a slave for 20 pieces of silver. It’s a fantastic story with many twists and turns but in the end, Joseph interpreted dreams of people in high places and as a result Pharaoh set him over all of Egypt, because he had predicted the famine that would come, and for years he stored up grain so that Pharaoh’s people would survive. So when the famine came, Joseph had food for Pharaoh and his people.

Meanwhile, back at the Canaan ranch, Jacob and his family were starving from the famine and so he sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. After all kinds of antics and a couple of chapters of comings and goings – you really should read the whole story – we come to today’s passage. It’s the big reveal, when Joseph makes himself known to his brothers – the ones who were jealous and sold him in to slavery, the ones who had lied about it all, the ones who had begged him for mercy, begged for food in the midst of famine, the ones who had bowed down before him just as Joseph’s dream had foretold decades before.

“I am your brother, Joseph,” he said *“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 life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God...”*

As it turns out, it’s not a random passage at all. If you didn’t know something of the story of Joseph and his brothers, it might seem so, but knowing something of the story offers us an epiphany, a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Joseph had never been perfect and in fact, had behaved pretty badly. So had his father Jacob, and still, God made Jacob the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob and Joseph are proof that God’s benefit does not rest only on the ones who behave properly. But even more importantly, they show us how God redeems everything. They show us that even the worst people or the worst circumstances have within them seeds of resurrection, seeds of the healing, reconciling, redemptive love of God. The Kingdom of God was made manifest in Joseph that day when he told his brothers the evil they had committed was used by God for good. He didn’t say what they did was ok. But he did make it possible for them to be brothers again, for them to forgive themselves as God forgives.

“A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” Jesus said. *“For the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”* He didn’t say it because we get what we

deserve. God only knows where we would be if that were the case. He said it because he knew, he knows that pouring out God's love and grace is essential if we are to be whole and even more essential if God's Kingdom really is to come. Amen.