

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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### Manifesting God's Kingdom

Some of you know that I don't choose the scripture passages I preach on each Sunday. Those passages were chosen long ago, and they are the bane and delight of preachers who are tied to the lectionary, the book gives us each Sunday's readings. Sometimes the readings come together in a methodical, read through the chapters sort of way, and other times they follow a shared theme or at the very least, hold some common thread. All throughout the season of Epiphany we've been reading from the Old Testament prophets, hearing God's Word through their voices and seeing God's kingdom through their eyes. Now suddenly we're reading from Genesis. Genesis? That seems random.

Epiphany is often called the season of light, the season when Jesus is made manifest as the light of the world, and the season to 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 was chosen to help us see who Jesus really is and the reality that he came among us, at least in part, so we could see the Kingdom of God. Why is it then, that a one-off reading from Genesis – the book of creation, the book of 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 – why do we hear that today? The Gospel I understand. It surely makes God's kingdom visible. 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.

While this gospel reading does show us a picture of God's kingdom, it has also been used to control and oppress – things that have no place in God's Kingdom. Today's Gospel 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 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 into heaven. 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 cruel politicians and the pedophiles, just as God loves you and me. And I think what Jesus is telling us, is that we are to do the same. That doesn't mean we should condone horrific behavior or the unjust treatment of God's people. It is to say if there is any possibility at all that 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 the unspeakable injustice we're seeing our country just now, is to pour out God's expansive and unconditional love.

All is not lost, you know. We can make a difference. I've recently learned of the work of Nobel Prize winning chemist Ilya Prigogine, who studied the ways complex systems behave under stress. He found that when chaos increases, small pockets of order—what he called “*islands of coherence*”—can stabilize the whole system.<sup>1</sup> These islands don't have to be big or powerful. They just need to hold steady, like anchors in a storm, until the chaos burns itself out and new patterns can emerge. We can be those islands of coherence, and Jesus showed us how. He didn't overthrow Rome. Instead, he gathered a small, resilient community, teaching them how to love fiercely, resist injustice nonviolently, and care for the least among them. That's how transformation always starts—not from the top down, but from the ground up.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus speaks to us of an ethic of love and generosity which is essential for making God's Kingdom visible. 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.

Loving generously is the only natural response to a boundlessly loving God. And 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 that story from Genesis today. Do you know Joseph's story? He was the child of his father's old age and his father loved him more than any of his brothers. Because of that, Joseph's brothers hated him. From what we can glean, Joseph behaved like a spoiled little brother and that didn't help. To make matters worse, he was a dreamer 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,*

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.garrisoninstitute.org/islands-of-coherence/>

<sup>2</sup> The Rev. Cameron Trimble; When Leadership Fails, Communities Must Rise. 2/21/24

*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 talking. Then one day their father Jacob wanted to know how his sheep-herding sons were faring out in the fields and so he sent Joseph to find them and to bring 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 the dreams of people in high places and as a result, Pharaoh set him over all of Egypt. Joseph had seen famine in the future and because he did, he stored up the grain that would feed Pharaoh’s people and keep them alive.

Meanwhile back in Canaan Jacob and the rest of his sons were starving, so Jacob sent them to Egypt – the only place with any food, thanks to Joseph - to buy some. 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 the mighty and powerful Joseph makes himself known to the brothers who had sold him into slavery. His brothers begged for mercy and for food, bowing down before him just as the dream had foretold.

*“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...”*

So you see, 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 offers us an epiphany, a manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Joseph had never been perfect – he’d actually behaved pretty badly. So had his father Jacob, and still, God made him the father of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob and Joseph are proof that God’s blessing does not rest only on the good behavers. 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.