

“Blessed and Forgiven”      August 17, 2008      Rev. Joyce Kirk-Moore

First, I must give a large credit to Tom for this sermon. He has studied the Joseph story backwards and forwards as well as in the original Hebrew language. And he is my inspiration for today. When we last left Joseph, he had been sold by his brothers into slavery. In Egypt he found a new life. He has been recognized as a talented youth with the gift for interpreting dreams and so he has become Pharaoh's right hand man. He has prepared the Egyptian empire to survive 7 years of famine. But his own family, his brothers and father in Canaan are not prepared, and the famine hits them hard. They hear of the “plenty” in Egypt and go seeking to buy grain. Now, our lectionary passage is only the summation of the dramatic encounter between Joseph and his brothers so here's a review of some of the details. When the ten brothers bow before Joseph, they do not recognize to whom they are speaking. But Joseph recognizes them, and perhaps it's a little revenge that prompts Joseph to call them spies and treat them so harshly. Or perhaps he's biding time so he can figure out what to do with this band of brothers who long ago betrayed him. Or perhaps he wonders if they've changed. Forgiveness and blessing do not flow forth immediately from Joseph's lips. Furthermore, Benjamin, Joseph's brother (the brother he really wants to see) is not with them. Father Jacob has not risked the loss of Rachel's remaining son. And so Joseph sends them home with grain but keeps Simeon as ransom until they return with Benjamin. The ruse has been set. Only when the family of Jacob once again is on the verge of starvation, will Jacob allow Benjamin to leave his side and go with the brothers back to Egypt for more grain.

There are two impasses which must be overcome before this family can move forward into the future. The first impasse is this: Will Jacob let go of Benjamin? Jacob has struggled all his life with his God, who he just can't quite trust to get things right. Will Jacob be able to place Benjamin in the hands of El Shaddai, the mysterious Other, who holds the future? Only when the family is about to die of starvation anyway, is Jacob able to let go of all his hopes and dreams represented in Rachel's son, Benjamin. The fundamental question is: Can God be trusted?

The second impasse comes when Joseph is faced with the question of what to do with his brothers. Can he forgive their evil intentions when long ago they sold him and told Jacob his son was dead. According to Tom it is Judah's passionate speech that is the turning point. When Joseph schemes a plot that will keep Benjamin with him, Judah places his own life on the line and pleads for Benjamin's release. Judah is not the same man as once he was. In the years since Judah participated in the dastardly deed of selling Joseph, he has been transformed by his own life experiences; he has matured. He has witnessed his father's overwhelming grief at believing Joseph is dead. Judah knows that even now Jacob loves Joseph and Benjamin best of all his sons, but now Judah's love for his father is a selfless love that transcends even his own desires for being loved. It is no longer all about him, it is all about his love for this father. Judah's example of creative transformation forces Joseph to take notice. He cannot deny that his brothers have changed. And at the thought of restored family relationships, Joseph weeps. He weeps so loudly that even Pharaoh's household hears his lamentations. This is a cathartic, restorative forgiving moment. The second impasse is overcome and Joseph beckons all his family to Egypt to share in the stored abundance.

And now we must take a time-out to carefully debunk some assumptions that a first reading of our text might suggest. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, the text reads: “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt: And now do not be depressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” Did all this bad stuff have to happen so good could come to be? Does God, like some people teach, plan

bad things just so good can come later on? I sent my Hebrew scholar to work. First of all, Tom says the Hebrew language does not have a simple past tense like English does. A more accurate translation might be: "For life, God has sent me." The Hebraic emphasis is on life; God cares about life! In this story, God does not premeditate evil to produce good. In our minds and in our language, we often reflect back on experiences and think "because this bad thing happened--this good happened." But that is our making sense of the past. God does not plan out the details of our lives so that somehow we will become better human beings through suffering. Rather, God is first and foremost *for life* and given just a chink in the armor of our human desire for control and self-determination, God can find a way to work the best possible good within whatever place we find ourselves.

Now, I tried to find an appropriate example to illuminate these ideas, and the one I know best is the one Tom and I are living out through his cancer. But I know this is not only our example, but that of many of you who live faithfully and bravely in the face of grave difficulties. So this example is meant to also honor you. I do not believe for one minute that God gave Tom cancer for the sake of a greater good. Can God bring forth blessing from this experience? Yes. But that's different than saying God meant it to be this way. Tom's cancer is nature gone awry. I do believe that through this experience Tom can be a channel of blessedness. I do believe that God has not abandoned us, because God comes to us in the love and concern of family, friends, and this community of faith. Tom says you are God's face to him, visibly, concretely reminding him that he is loved and cared for.

We both believe we are blessed to live in southern California where medicine and research abounds. We are blessed with employers who care and support us. We have good medical insurance. If we were one of so many without medical insurance, we'd be in trouble by now. We have much to give us hope and comfort. Will I be a better pastor as a result of Tom's disease? Yes, I think I will. I now know firsthand what some of you have and do go through. Did God make Tom sick so I'd learn this lesson? No, no, no! I find myself in the strange place of often being comforted by Tom; the one who is sick. Isn't it supposed to be the other way around? Am I not the one to be offering him strength and comfort? Yet, ever since I met him, I've known Tom to have this deep, abiding, centered faithfulness. So the other morning over coffee, I asked him: "When did you come to this place of such radical confidence in God?" He told me that part of it came through studying and living with these ancient biblical texts. While getting his Ph.D. in physics at Yale, he studied Hebrew. These texts revealed to him the big picture, God's big picture. He said, he learned it wasn't all about him, but about him being joined to God's realm, God's dream, God's kingdom. And finally, he has confidence in God because he does not feel abandoned by God but rather, he feels blessed with the best possible good, given the situation in which real life, his life happens. And so he continues to inspire me.

But (and I know I'm making a big shift here) what about the starving children in Africa and the conflicts of war that devastate our world? Does God have a "plan" for their suffering to turn into a good thing? Or, can't God intervene to bring a bit more balance to the universe? This is when God invites, employs, pleads with us (like Judah pleaded for Benjamin) to place our lives on the line, to become co-creators with God for good, to do a better job of sharing for the good of God's world. If like Joseph's brothers did, they come to us asking for bread shall we turn them away? And it's not just about offering a handout--though when someone's hungry that's important, but it is also participating in creating new structures by being God's instruments for well-being and peace in the world, by using our heads, our hearts and our hands for God's creative love to unfold.

We are meant to “draw the circle wide” and not be distracted by didactic shoulds and should nots. The circle is drawn not as a measurement of how good other people are but as an indication of how large our love is. So the lesson for today is: will we resolve the two great impasses this story poses: 1) Will we trust the love of the El Shaddai, the mysterious other, by placing our lives humbly and faithfully within God’s dream for this world? And 2) Will we forgive--recognizing that transformation and new possibilities may happen? But even if others don’t come around, will we forgive in order to free ourselves from “shaking our finger” at what should have been instead of giving thanks for the blessedness that is. To resolve these impasses will place a demand, a call on our lives to be generous, loving, thoughtful, and faithful servants of the Holy One. May this be so!