

Breaking the Cycles

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Scripture: Genesis 45:1-11, 15; Luke 6:27-28

Hymns: VT 168 – Peace To You; VT 797 – We Are People of God's Peace

Genesis 45:1-11, 15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. ⁵ And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶ 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. ⁷ God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸ So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹ Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰ You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹ I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’

¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Luke 6:27-38

²⁷ “But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you.

³² “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. ³⁵ But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

³⁷ “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; ³⁸ give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.”

We seem to be living in a time of deep divides. As the Truckers' Convoy continues to occupy Ottawa calling public health guidelines tyranny,¹ reports from a recent study in Saskatchewan said that most people believe the pandemic has divided us, making our society more polarized within the last year.² This is the case even within families, where differences of opinion around health guidelines, masking, and Covid-19

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/14/world/americas/canada-trucker-protests.html?smid=fb-share&fbclid=IwAR1ssitFnWizIC3rrFCWNkA2bYIO7VZphdcoij4LmzXzRGWawrfq5LsyXol>

² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/saskatchewan/divisiveness-survey-saskatchewan-1.6325651>

vaccines have made family gatherings awkward at best, or full of conflict or downright impossible at worst. And there's something about conflict within families that strikes us as particularly sad. Families are supposed to provide safety and care, making conflict and violence within families a particularly painful experience. And yet it is something many experience.

Our Scripture for today dives into one of these stories of family conflict and betrayal: that of Joseph and his brothers, the sons of Jacob, who will become the twelve tribes of Israel. Now remember the beginning of their epic story, back in Genesis 37, when Joseph is Israel's favourite, the one upon whom he bestows a beautiful coat of many colours. Because of their father's overt favouritism toward Joseph, we're told that his eleven brothers "hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Gen. 37:4). So they come up with a terrible plan: they will get rid of their brother by selling him into slavery, and telling their father he's dead. (Sibling rivalry taken to the extreme!) And they go through with this betrayal, and Joseph ends up in Egypt, his life seemingly ruined by his own brothers and their jealousy. But by the time we get to our story, a lot has happened: through his gift of interpreting dreams, Joseph has become an advisor to the Pharaoh himself, and has been given the task of providing food during a time of famine he had foretold from Pharaoh's dreams. The names of Joseph's two sons symbolize this great reversal of his circumstances: he names them "Manasseh, meaning "making to forget," for "God has made me forget all the hardship and all my father's house," he says. And the younger is Ephraim, "to be fruitful" – "[f]or God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes," Joseph says (41:50-52).

But then this time of famine begins, and Joseph's brothers find themselves in need of food. Hearing that there is food in Egypt, they go there and encounter the great governor, Joseph. They don't even recognize him, but he realizes it's them. And he proceeds to deceive them, to accuse them of being spies and put them in prison, and to demand they go get their youngest brother, Benjamin, and bring him back with them. And he sneaks money into their bags of grain as well. It's almost as though Joseph doesn't know how to react to seeing his brothers again, and is all over the map, emotionally. He's angry yet loves them and wants to provide for his father, he treats them harshly and won't reveal who he is, so that they feel manipulated and confused and scared of this Egyptian governor and his strange, seemingly-loaded demands. In his shock, Joseph is realizing that he is now the one who holds power over the lives of his brothers. How the tables have turned!

Finally, in our passage, Joseph reveals his true identity to his brothers: "I am Joseph," he says. "Is my father still alive?" But "his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence." Their initial response is one of stunned silence; what will Joseph, who is now a powerful Egyptian governor, do to them? Commentator Justin Michael Reed writes that given all of the sibling violence in the book of Genesis, we might be expecting more of the same: some kind of retaliation by Joseph, who was victimized and betrayed so cruelly by his brothers. He has been all over the map with them since they came to Egypt. "But," says Reed, "that is not what we get. Something has changed. At the start of our passage, Joseph is weeping and crying aloud (Genesis 45:1-2)." Reed continues,

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, they seem to presume that the old patterns of violence will persist; the narrator notes that they were silent because

they were terrified (Genesis 45:3). But Joseph responds to their fears by revealing his surprising new perspective on the matter. He starts by vocalizing their wrongdoing, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt” (Genesis 45:4). But instead of **only** focusing on the harm that the brothers intended and caused, Joseph transitions to asserting God’s role: “it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you” (Genesis 45:5; see also verse 7). By framing his brothers’ harmful actions within the larger program of God’s salvific work, Joseph charts a different path from their expectations.³

Even though he could have used his power to make his brothers’ lives miserable, as they had done for him, Joseph chooses another way: he chooses to break the cycle of violence and to offer forgiveness to them. If they had not sold him into slavery, he could not have saved so many lives during the famine, including the lives of his brothers and their families. God has brought something good out of their cruel act. So now Joseph invites them to come live in Egypt, where he will provide for them all and make sure that they “will not come to poverty” (v. 11). The passage closes with the brothers reunited and reconciled, weeping and kissing and talking together (v. 15).

Did you know that the Old Testament contained this powerful story of nonviolence and restorative justice? Sometimes we think those are New Testament ideas, but there is in fact a long tradition of Hebrew nonviolence that runs through the whole Bible. Jesus didn’t come up with that from scratch, but drew on stories like Joseph’s to show the power of peacebuilding.

But is this passage realistic? If we think of real conflicts, like those over Covid-19 health mandates, is it as easy as getting in a room together and saying it will all work

³ See Justin Michael Reed, “Commentary on Genesis 45,” *Working Preacher*, published Feb. 20, 2022, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/seventh-sunday-after-epiphany-3/commentary-on-genesis-45-11-15-2>

out according to God's will? There are a few things to note about this passage, and what it takes for Joseph to get to the point of responding nonviolently:

1. Firstly, he doesn't instantly offer forgiveness when he meets his brothers for the first time in Egypt. Not only have many years passed since they betrayed him, but he also has a complex reaction when he first meets them again, and does react angrily toward them and hide who he is from them. So it took years of letting go of that hurt before he could ultimately offer reconciliation.
2. This is not easy. Joseph weeps twice in this encounter, revealing just how much pain he is carrying because of this broken relationship. The lectionary actually cuts out the opening verses, but I thought it important to include them. They say, "Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it." And at the end of the passage, he weeps again while kissing his brothers, so the passage is bookended by weeping. This is difficult work, this effort to reconcile with family members who wronged him. It's also not a one-time, resolved thing; indeed, in chapter 50, Joseph and his brothers talk again, and Joseph again weeps.
3. There are risks to the theological explanation that Joseph offers his brothers, that what happened was God's will so that he could go on to save many lives during the famine. Turning to Reed's commentary again, he says,

This theology from Joseph—that the harm done by his brothers was actually part of God's bigger plan to save many lives—has both dangers and benefits. In terms of its harmful consequences, a theology like this

has been, and continues to be, used by those who see the slaughter and enslavement of millions of Africans as part of the larger plan from God to spread the gospel and save souls. One apparent danger of this theology is how it implicates God as a cause of extreme suffering and seems to justify something as inhumane as slavery. ... God's will for the greater good does not justify the evil actions and intentions of people.

In other words, just because God is able to bring life from death and beauty from brokenness doesn't mean that God desires us to be broken or to suffer. So we must be careful not to jump to those conclusions when interpreting the events of our lives theologically.

This brings us to Jesus' familiar words from the Sermon on the Plain (Luke's version of the Sermon on the Mount), our other lectionary passage for today: ²⁷ "But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ²⁹ If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. ³⁰ Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. ³¹ Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6:27-31). Read through the lens of Joseph's difficult story, these are confirmed to be among the "hard sayings" of Jesus. But they are related to Jesus' saying about looking after the log in your own eye instead of being concerned about the speck in someone else's eye – we can control our actions toward others, even if not theirs toward us.

I read a true story about a woman whose experience mirrors Joseph's, in some ways. Growing up in a large family, her father and brothers abused her, and when she sought help, her mother and sisters told her she must be making it up. They didn't believe their family members capable of that kind of violence and brutality. So she cut

ties with them for many years. But when her parents were elderly, she reconnected with her family. Having done a lot of healing, she felt safe enough to reconcile with them. But when her father died, it brought up the abuse again, and the woman's siblings again denounced her and called her a liar for ever suggesting that she had been abused. So she cut ties with her family again, for her own safety and mental health.

Like Joseph, this story shows us that sometimes reconciliation doesn't come, despite our best efforts. The woman did everything she could, went above and beyond in trying to reconcile with her family. But in the end, she had to make peace with their relationship remaining broken, and focus on trying to do better and break the cycle of abuse for her own children. So Jesus doesn't say, make sure you reconcile with everyone and have no enemies. No, he says, "love your enemies; treat others as you would like to be treated." Even if someone abuses their power over you, do not do so in return. Civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. put it this way: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." In the age of Trucker Convoys and the rise of neo-Nazis, this isn't a call to shallow compromises that allow the most vulnerable to suffer harm. As Mennonite pastor Melissa Florer-Bixler writes in her book, *How to Have an Enemy*, this isn't about the type of unity that pretends we are all the same or fears disrupting the status quo for the sake of life-giving change.⁴ Rather, like Joseph and Dr. King, this is about a love that breaks the cycle of violence, love that drives out hate, love that, ultimately, perhaps only over generations, will transform all of us and our life together into the true and lasting peace of the reign of God. AMEN

⁴ Melissa Florer-Bixler, *How to Have an Enemy: Righteous Anger and the Work of Peace* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2021), Ch. 1.