

Genesis 45:1-15

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. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 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.

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. 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 ploughing 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; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 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. 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. 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.” And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.... Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Opening Prayer:

God of community, whose call is more insistent than ties of family of blood; may we so respect and love those whose lives are linked with ours that we fail not in loyalty to you, but make choices according to your will, though Jesus Christ.

Amen. (HWB #736)

Who are my Siblings?

In our scripture texts this morning we have heard about the meeting of estranged brothers and words about the ways in which those who practice the faith differently might get along. They are compelling scripture texts. And I begin this sermon with a story that I feel leads into both the Genesis and Romans passages for today. It is a true story. I know this because it appeared in the *Saskatoon Star-Phoenix*—understanding that what they print is often a version of the truth. The head line stated, “Swift Current business owner salutes neighbours, fights virus stigma”. Anything like this coming out of “Speedy Creek”, I thought, warranted a further read.

Swift Current-area business owner Scott Lamb says he would have lost his home about six years ago if it wasn’t for the quick actions of members of the nearby Swift Current Hutterite colony.

“They saved my house from burning down. They caught a fire in front of my house and got it under control before it could have been really bad... I mean, how do you describe a neighbour? That’s everyone’s dream neighbour: someone who saves your house.”

Lamb said his positive experiences with the Swift Current colony, as well as several others, have left him troubled by reports of Hutterites being denied services or made to feel unwelcome as they grapple with COVID-19 outbreaks. “They’re our neighbours, and...a vital part of our community. They’re a cornerstone,” he said, pointing to the charity work undertaken by colonies, as well as their contributions to local economies.

He said he and a friend were discussing the situation late last week when they hit on the idea of organizing a vehicle parade to show their support. Lamb said he and his friend started making phone calls and had 30 vehicles committed to take part in the parade within just a few hours...Lamb said he got calls and emails [the following morning] from members of several area colonies, thanking everyone who participated.

Lamb said the highlight of the evening for him was seeing the reaction from the colony’s children. “I think for me the takeaway was the kids’ faces; they were smiling and waving. I think, for me, that’s the most important thing that happened last night, was just reassuring the kids.”¹

¹ Bryn Levy, “Vehicle parade supports Hutterite communities” in *Saskatoon StarPhoenix* (Aug 7, 2020), p. A3.

I really appreciate this illustration out of Swift Current. First, I am grateful that some people recognize the compassionate attitude taught in many Hutterite communities. I may not agree with all their religious policies, but I can give thanks that when a neighbour's house is on fire they will stop to do what they can. I appreciate the contributions they make to the blood banks, the food banks, the Canadian Food Grain Bank. In some respects, those on the margins of society—the Hutterites for example—through works of mercy endear themselves to others of their community. The Hutterites, I am guessing, did not extend these works of mercy in hopes of currying favour should a global pandemic take place; rather they did them because they were taught to be this way with neighbours. There is a reciprocal relationship with neighbours: be we immigrant or later immigrant; be we white collar or blue collar; be we employed, unemployed, under-employed or retired. This is the reality of being community together. This was the case for the churches in Rome.

I say churches in Rome on account of the biblical debate which speculates on a singular Roman congregation or the presence of multiple house churches in Rome.² Given the 1st century times I would sense that there were a cluster of house churches: some mostly of Jewish ethnicity and others of mostly gentile background. It is likely that by the time the letter to the Romans was written, the Gentile Christians in Rome outnumbered the Jewish Christians. The theological reflection of Paul's letter to Roman Christians certainly reflects this ethnic tension. To the Jews he directly points out that we are adopted by God. To the Gentiles he directly points out that there majority should be mindful of the dietary concerns of the Jews (see Ch. 14; particularly 14:20-23). Those in the majority, those with relative power, have additional responsibility for the brothers and sisters not in the majority.

As Don Klaassen noted last week, for those with social clout it is significant to advocate for others under duress. In our context this might mean supporting efforts to increase mental health resources to our 1st Nations. It might mean supporting those returning to school or to business. In this era of garden abundance I have agreed with Patty to eat out once a week. If we do not buy food from them, who will??? It The story of Scott Lamb and the Hutterites as well as the social setting of Romans stuck with me as I considered our Old Testament lesson of the day: Gen: 45.1-15.

Joseph was foreigner, you see. Given his Hebraic upbringing he likely spoke Egyptian with a bit of an accent. Still, he was a capable leader and after release from the local penitentiary found himself in a position of influence within the

² Outlined in Karl P. Donfried's *The Romans Debate*.

government of the day. In some respects, crafting an economic policy to feed the world (based on dreams no less) and generate serious currency for the government was relatively easy for him. More challenging was the moment his brothers and step-brothers came looking for assistance. Sometimes fiscal wisdom precedes emotional wisdom, but maybe Joseph had dreams to guide him hear as well.

Maybe some of us know this already, but Joseph had a challenging relationship with his brothers. He was the one that their father—according to the text—loved most of all (Gen 37:4). He was the one who dreamed of sheaves, representing the brothers, who bowed down to the Joseph sheaf. He is the one who shared another dream in which the sun, moon and eleven stars (his family perchance?) were bowing down to him. He was the one gifted with a beautiful robe. He was arrogant, rude and opinionated (like many of us) and probably deserved what he got. Or maybe the brothers acted a bit harshly.

The brothers eliminated the problem child. They sold Joseph into slavery never to be heard from again, they thought (Gen 37:12ff). These brothers of Joseph deceived their father. They lied to the rest of the family. They abandoned their brother to the vagaries of slavery. Sounds like a healthy family system, no? This is the back story to chapter 45 when the brothers of Joseph arrive in the royal court seeking to procure grain for their survival amidst a drought. Now what? Mercy for the world in sharing stored up grain can sometimes pale in comparison with the small acts of mercy towards those closest to us who have hurt us deeply.³

Speaking as one who tries to be attentive to concerns of the national and international, I almost find the tensions of church community, home, and the Province to be more harrowing than the national or international. Demonstrating mercy closer to home is often more difficult than writing a check to MCC, MEDA, UNICEF, the Food Bank, some worthy organization, or even volunteering time.

This, though, is sermonizing—and people have mixed feelings about a steady stream of sermonizing. It is time for another story.

We have Friesen family Zoom most every Sunday night; I join them now and then. Patty's mother shared an experience from earlier this month which stuck with me. She has given up driving and now takes the bus to the mall: to do her banking, to do her grocery shopping, to do her library run, to take care of other errands. She got to the mall other day and lost her bus pass amidst all the bustle. Without her bus pass she still went to the bus stop for her trip home. After explanation the bus driver let her on without a question. A woman on the bus overheard the conversation precipitating the free ride home and offered three bus tokens for her use in days ahead. The next day she returned to the mall, with one

³ Granted, both require immense courage and compassion.

of those gifted tokens, to check in with the businesses she visited the day previous. Sure enough, someone had turned in the bus pass.

A person let her on the bus without proper fare. A person gave her bus tokens. A person turned in her bus pass. We are all people capable of offering such kindness to those around us. A Tim's card, a tin of tuna offered to the Food Bank, a car rally for a colony—these are all a reflection of God's Spirit among us. I do not doubt that those beyond the church are also people sensitive to such Divine impulses. It is my hope that the religious life in which we participate encourages and supports such spiritual presence in our communities. This important ministry with our brothers and sisters who are strangers, however, stands along side an invitation to compassionately abide well with those closest to us.

Now we are to the part of my sermon in which I consider practices that might undergird and expand our capacity of compassion for the sisters and brothers among us in our families, places of work, schools, cities, Province, etc...

I think a foundational element in this all is to cultivate a love of oneself. If we are unable to love ourselves, with all our foibles, we are hooped. As part of the beginning to his letter to the Roman Christians Paul names a lengthy list of lapses in human judgement (Rm 1:24-2:1). At the end of this rampage he concludes: "Therefore you have no excuse, whoever you are, when you judge". Can we be kind with ourselves? Can we be kind with others?? We will upon occasion write or speak a word to harshly. Yes. We will upon occasion not be patient. Yes. We will upon occasion not support or advocate for the orphan, the widow, and alien. Regrettably yes. In the face of imperfection we must be kind to ourselves and not too harshly judge others. Be inquisitive, a favorite social worker and theologian of Susanne and I might say.⁴ We need to move from judgement to emotional inquiry; from judgement to mercy.

Secondly, I think it is vital we habituate the instructions of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount reiterated in Romans that we pray for those with whom we do not understand or agree with (Mt: 5:44). Praying for people—their well being, their family, their work—actually increases our capacity for compassion. We can mindfully hold friends and perceived foes in the light of God petitioning for our healing and their healing. We can do this!

It is no surprise to me that Paul sums up his letter to the Romans with very direct practical advice (Rm 12:12-21). He writes that we ought to be ardent in spirit, serve, rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer, contribute to the needs of the church, extend hospitality, bless those who persecute you, rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep, live in harmony with others, do

⁴ See most anything written by Brene Brown.

not be haughty but associate with the lowly”. This is a great list, and I would be pleased to live into half of what he suggests. If I and we can do 50% of this beautiful list I will trust the grace of God to continue the growing us in the weeks and years ahead.

Finally, we respond compassionately to the concerns of our day. I was taken with the story of Portland, Ore mayor Ted Wheeler who was tear gassed by federal agents as he stood at a fence guarding a federal courthouse standing alongside protestors. Mayor Wheeler said it was the first time he'd been tear gassed and appeared slightly dazed and coughed as he put on a pair of goggles someone handed him and drank water. He didn't leave his spot at the front, however, and continued to take the gas.⁵ I do not know all the struggles with which people of our community live with, but I want to be one who abides with those seeking a more just world.

The texts for today invite those with social power to act generously to those without power: kin folk, national folk, or the international community. The texts for today invite us to practice mercy with those closest to us. Can we not be merciful to ourselves?; to those nearest us?; those whose lives intersect ours? I think, with God's help, we will be able. Sundays are the day of resurrection, so let us embrace the opportunity of new and deeper life offered to us. - Amen

Patrick Preheim, co-pastor Nutana Park Mennonite Church

Benediction

May God bless us and keep us:

that where there is hatred we might sow love

that where there is injury, pardon

May the very face of God shine upon us and be gracious to us:

that where there is despair, we might offer hope

that where there is darkness, we might share light

that where there is sadness, we might bring joy

May God's presence embrace us and give us peace

that we might be consoled and offer consolation

that we might be pardoned and offer pardon

that in our dying we might be born to eternal life. Amen.

⁵ <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/portland-wheeler-tear-gas-1.5659898>