

Triune Mercy Center Sermon for February 20, 2022

“Both Sides of Forgiveness”

Let us pray; Oh Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen

Psychologist Peter Kornfield tells the story of a middle aged man, Allen, who came to one of Kornfield’s meditation retreats. Obviously, by coming to the retreat, Allen hoped for something in the way of peace or healing, but his needs became clearer when he confessed in private to Dr. Kornfield that he had embezzled thousands of dollars from the company where he worked. As they talked quietly and without judgment, his conflicted feelings came out. He had experienced some pleasure at his cleverness, at getting away with the theft, which he had justified in his own mind; but mostly these days he had been experiencing a lot of tension and fear, and some guilt. He was suffering. The perpetrators of hurt rarely get off free from their own emotions.

On the other side, there were people—colleagues and friends—who were the victims of his betrayal, who, if they knew, would also also suffer—not only the theft itself, but the betrayal of trust. Victims of broken trust also suffer greatly, but differently, from perpetrators. It can appear that there is no way out of this web of suffering—no easy way out, that is.

Without going into the rest of the story, Kornfield reports that Allen’s healing began with his confession—a confession given to a non-judgmental listener, allowing him to get it out in the open and examine it for himself. Confession is pivotal for transformation. That’s why we do it here every single Sunday.

Of course, there were many more difficult steps ahead needed to repair the relationship of trust that Allen had broken—steps that

both sides would have to take that would be hard. I don't know the end of Allen's story but the suffering involved in relationships of broken trust is a good lead-in to our Scriptural texts for today.

You may have heard, as I have, that there is a so-called "golden thread" that runs through all of Scripture, from Genesis, through the prophets and the Psalms, to the Gospels and the letters of Paul, all the way to Revelation. The idea of this golden thread is that, even with all the seeming irregularities and contradictions in the flowing pattern of our Holy Scripture, if you took out this golden thread, the binding message of the Bible would come undone—just as surely as when you tug too hard on a loose thread in your knitted sweater.

I suspect if you thought about it, you could give a name to the "golden thread" of Scripture. You could, of course, call it simply "God." Or you could call it "Love." I think they are one and the same.

Recently I ran across a slightly different way of expressing the idea of the golden thread of love in Scripture, and it added some depth to my understanding. The name I picked up on for the binding thread of Scripture was: "the integrity of love." I was hooked because I particularly like the word "integrity." Integrity means that the parts of something must be viewed as a whole—integrated. That integration of the parts is a holy thing.

God's story from creation to revelation is one integrated story—integrated or bound together by the golden thread of God's love for all of creation. Like children though, we pick at any seemingly loose threads, choosing one part over another, preferring one message over another. In that way, we can get ourselves unraveled! Thread-pulling is a sermon in itself, but surprise, it's not the text for today. It does help, however, in the understanding of our somewhat disturbing texts today, where the "integrity of love" binds together the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel.

For the record, I believe Jesus studied and taught the Scripture with the **integrity of love** as his guiding principle, sometimes seeming

to override, but actually expanding the meaning of the Biblical texts. We will see that in our readings today as they follow the golden thread of love's integrity from Genesis to Jesus.

We will begin with the lengthy and highly detailed epic saga of Joseph, who was the son of Jacob, who was the son of Isaac, who was the son of Abraham. This saga is contained in the first book of the Bible—Genesis. We will be considering a very short portion of Joseph's story today, near the end of the much longer story. In fact, the long story could be considered the longest complete story in the Bible—covering 13 whole chapters!

I urge you to go back this week and read the whole story of Joseph. You may be surprised at its tense drama, so engaging that a number contemporary stories, songs and plays have been drawn from it; for example, you may have seen or heard of the delightful musical--Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

Because we will be focused on the suspenseful ending of the Joseph story, I need to give you a little synopsis of the beginning of his story before I read the Scripture.

The long story begins when Joseph is 17 years old. Maybe you recall that Jacob gave this, his most beloved and dreamy son, a coat of many colors—which would have been rare and expensive in those days—so a bit of favoritism here. However, we soon learn that Joseph's 11 brothers had grown quite jealous of him, and as the story goes, one day when Joseph was sent out to look for them, they took the teen's coat, threw him into a pit and planned to leave him there to die. However, they were soon tempted instead into selling him to some passing traders for 20 pieces of silver (yes!), and the traders took their attractive new slave off to Egypt! After the sale, the brothers took Joseph's coat, covered it with blood, and told their father Jacob that a wild animal must have gotten him. Jacob thus believed Joseph to be dead and grieved greatly.

Meanwhile in Egypt, Joseph became a slave in Pharaoh's court. There his life took many twists and turns. In a major turn, his master's wife tried to seduce him, but, as a man of God, he refused her. She was irate and accused him to her husband of initiating the seduction. He was then cast into prison again. However, while there, he accurately interpreted some very strange dreams of his fellow prisoners. Word of his gift of dream interpretation spread to Pharaoh, and he was eventually called in to interpret two very strange dreams for the Pharaoh. There, through his success as a dream interpreter for Pharaoh, he was promoted to Pharaoh's second in command—a position of great power.

Meanwhile, Joseph's father grieved and his brothers struggled with the famine that had come into their land. It was this very famine that some years later, brought the brothers (except for Benjamin the youngest) to the Egyptian Pharaoh's palace seeking aid. There they found themselves face-to-face with their long lost brother Joseph, whom they had betrayed, but they did not recognize him. He, however, knew exactly who they were. Oh! The tempting thoughts that must have run through his mind!

Our text for today describes this significant meeting of the two sides of a sadly broken relationship between Joseph and his brothers.

Consider if you were Joseph—gravely betrayed. And here are your betrayers in person, asking you for help—not knowing it is you. I wonder how often over the years, Joseph's dreams had included the taste of revenge? Or consider if you were, say Ruben, one of the brothers, who knew in his heart of hearts that he had sold his brother into slavery. Brother Reuben seemed to have had a good heart. I wonder how often over the years Reuben had thought about Joseph and felt shame and remorse?

Such a dramatic meeting. It could have gone lots of ways. Let's now see how it did go:

Hear now our first reading from Genesis 45: 3-11 and 15. We begin with Joseph revealing his identity to his brothers as they stood before him in Pharaoh's palace.

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.

The word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God.

The thing we most quickly glean from this story is that the victim was the giver of forgiveness. To be able to forgive a grievous hurt is no small act of love. It is so much easier and so much more

satisfying to hold a grudge and wish for, or take, revenge. It is so much easier to move on, while clutching resentment and anger and an air of superiority over the evil-doer, and Joseph could have done any of those things.

At the point of Joseph's act of compassion and mercy, there had been no confession, no obvious remorse, no asking for forgiveness. Joseph had made his choice freely without seeking any of that. Mercy and forgiveness were initiated from within his heart, between him and God, if you will, and did not rely on the admission of guilt by his betrayers.

I don't know about you, but I think I would have waited until my brothers acknowledged their guilt, told me they were so very sorry and begged my forgiveness. But instead, Joseph said to his betrayers, "Come closer to me." Sometimes the only way an enemy can become a friend, can ask for and accept forgiveness is for the one who was hurt to open the door that guilt has closed.

The integrity of love.

Now Joseph was lucky; his life turned out well and in the end, he took the high road, the road of love and mercy. He was a man of God, but he was also quite human. So, I do have to tell you (from an earlier part of the story) that Joseph didn't reveal himself and reach out the minute he realized his brothers had shown up asking for help. He messed with them a little before he embraced them and sent for his father. Indeed, he tricked them into thinking he was about to throw them into prison for stealing something that he had arranged to put in their packs. Using this leverage, he sent for his father and youngest brother; so that he could see their faces as well.

In a way, he made them walk in his shoes of uncertainty and fear, if only briefly. I have to admit, that was satisfying to me, and probably to him. It felt like “just deserts,” and is so tempting, but in the end, he corrected course and returned to mercy.

When we are hurt, we are tempted to want the other to know how that felt. We want them to admit to the truth of our experience. Sadly, that is unlikely to be healing for either side, and even less likely to result in resolution of the past. So what are we called to do in the case of a broken relationship? Joseph gave us one model: he, from a place of power and well-being, initiated mercy.

Jesus presses us harder on the integrity of love. Like it or not, at some points in our lives, we are all betrayers and victims of betrayal—sometimes in small matters; sometimes in huge, life-altering matters. In betrayal, both sides are broken and each sees the other as enemy—for a few minutes, or for a few decades, or even a few centuries. Jesus presents, in the sermon on the Plain, the most drastic of remedies for broken relationships –the hardest lesson among his many difficult lessons on the integrity of love. I am reading from Luke 6 as Jesus speaks:

But I say to you that listen, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you. Bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you... Be merciful as your Father is merciful.

Because we don't want to hear and absorb this, I am going to read it again! *(Repeat)*

This is the challenging word of God for the people of God. Thanks be to God? Thanks be to God.

Now it's time to step back a little and reflect on our own lives. Have you ever been betrayed or hurt by another person or group? Have you ever been the betrayer or the one who hurts another? I especially don't like to think of myself as either one, but we have all been on both sides of hurt and relationship betrayal, right? It seems to be part of being human. Sometimes it's a small matter and is quickly resolved or passes as insignificant, and sometimes it is bigger, more damaging, and threatens to undo the relationship. Sometimes it does.

As I pondered some of the more drastic ways relationships break apart, the words of Jesus to love our enemy became increasingly more difficult for me to translate into the real world of betrayal, abuse, bullying, crime, apartheid, racism, or war? As usual, it seems, Jesus is asking more of us than we can do. How can we love someone who breaks us? How can love speak to the victims of our harm-doing? Shouldn't love just give up when the damage is great and lasting?

One of my favorite Christian theologians is Miroslav Volf, a native of Croatia. He tells of an occasion when he was giving a theological lecture on loving our enemies. At the end of the lecture, another well-known theologian stood up and asked him this question: "But can you embrace a cetnik—that is, a Serbian fighter?" There was a great long silence.

For months Serbian fighters ...had been sowing desolation in Volf's native Croatia--herding people into concentration camps, raping women, burning down churches, and destroying cities. Serbians were the enemy of Croatians, for sure.

As Volf tells it, "It took me a while to answer, though I immediately knew what I wanted to say." What he said in answer to

“Can you love your enemy?” was this: “No, I cannot—but as a follower of Christ I think I should be able to.” “I felt that my very faith was at odds with itself.” Volf went on to write and pray about this and his works since then have had much to teach about loving the enemy.

Sometimes broken relationships can be fixed, and that can bring great relief and joy to the parties involved. But sometimes they cannot be fixed, nor should they be.—not directly, that is. We do not encourage the abused person to return to the abuser for more punishment. Forgiving the Mother Emmanuel Church shooter, as the families of his victims did, did not involve setting him free to murder again. Neither did Joseph offer himself up for more harm at the hands of his brothers.

So how is love for the enemy possible when we do intend to conform to the enemy’s ways. Joseph knew. Jesus knew. They knew that there is a third party necessary to the healing of broken relationships. We can love because we know that we are loved—and so is our enemy—by God. When the focus of the broken parties turns from self and other to God, there is hope for individual renewal and healing, and sometimes for the relationship itself to have new life.

Loving my enemy does not involve submitting to my enemy but it does involve holding that person or group or even myself in the way of love; that is, in compassionate understanding, in prayer, and in mercy. None of that may change my enemy; but it will set me free and heal me. God will heal me and set me free. I will not have to carry that burden any longer.

With God’s help, Nelson Mandela came out of years in prison to lead reconciliation conferences between his people and their

oppressors. With God's help, Martin Luther King taught non-violence as he led his people to claim justice for themselves. With God's help, we can forgive ourselves and our enemies. With God's help, we can lovingly pray for those who have persecuted us. With God's help, and time, we may even be able to repair the relationships. The kingdom of God's coming is not based on justification but on redemption. That happened on the cross and it can happen for us.

We need to know that in the exquisite freedom of God's love, we can admit our hurt and our desire to hurt, and trust that if we accept it, we are forgiven in that moment. As God forgives us, sets us free and loves us unconditionally, so we are called to love others—even our enemies, even ourselves.

I am tempted to just leave it at that and let each of us stew in our own resistances to loving our enemy—an enemy that might even be ourselves. I think it is meant that we stew and struggle with this precisely because it is not the way of justice that we have come to know. It is not the justice of revenge or pay-back. It is the lasting justice of a changed heart.

In that vein, I will close with some good advice, in the spirit of the integrity of love, from the Psalmist:

Don't get caught up in the stew that hurt has generated. Instead, focus on serving and loving the Lord and the past will fade into the past; so that God can guide your future.

May it be so. Amen

