

Grace Lutheran Church
40 N. Main St., Hatfield, PA 19440
7th Sunday after the Epiphany, February 20, 2022
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38: “Who IS my enemy?”
Pastor Nancy Raabe

We have just heard Jesus’ call to love our enemies. But first we must ask: Who is my enemy, and how are enemies made?

There is hardly a better Biblical illustration of how enemies are made than the story of Joseph, if we consider an enemy to be “a person who is actively opposed or hostile to someone or something.” Today’s reading gives us only the end of the story, the moment of reconciliation, but overall it is a shocking depiction of how the worst enemies can be bred from within systems that are supposed to be grounded in love--and the devastation that can follow.

Let’s take a magic carpet ride across this wild and crazy narrative. Right from the start we see there are issues between Joseph and his 11 brothers. Their father Jacob made no effort to conceal that Joseph was his favorite, bestowing on him a colorful, flowing robe of the kind that conveyed rank and status. This didn’t just annoy his brothers—Genesis tells us the gift of the coat made them hate him. Things went from bad to worse when Joseph began telling them about strange dreams which he said meant that someday they all would be bowing down to him. This made them hate Joseph all the more.

Jealousy eats away at the brothers until they can’t take it anymore. They resolve to get rid of Joseph, with no concern for what losing his favorite son might do to their father, and plot to hurl the young man into a deep pit. Their plan was to leave him for dead until they see a passing caravan headed for Egypt, so they make a little money by selling him into slavery. Having grabbed his colorful coat before throwing him in the pit, the brothers drench it in goat’s blood and show it to their anguished father as evidence that Joseph must have been killed by a wild animal.

Down in Egypt, though, Joseph is having quite the series of adventures. He ends up as a slave in the household of Pharaoh’s police chief, whose wife repeatedly tries to seduce him. Finally she lunges at him, grabs a piece of clothing as he runs off, and uses that to trump up a rape charge. That gets Joseph thrown into prison, where his ability to interpret dreams works hugely in his favor. Eventually Pharaoh hears of Joseph’s gift and asks him about a series of troubling dreams. Joseph interprets these so compellingly that Pharaoh makes him his Number Two man. Joseph wisely advises the nation to stockpile food in the good years. This makes Egypt the envy of the world when famine takes over, bringing starving people to Egypt from far and wide to buy grain. Among these are 10 of Joseph’s brothers, all but the youngest, Benjamin, who must come before Joseph to make their request for the grain.

This is where Joseph’s arrogance runs wild. When he realizes the brothers don’t recognize him behind all the Egyptian regalia, he begins to plot his revenge. First Joseph accuses them of being spies sent to identify where the grain is kept so others can plunder the storehouses. As the

brothers protest their innocence, they're caught in their own lie—they tell him, "We are 12 brothers of an honest father, although one of our number is now dead." This lie may have inspired Joseph to twist the knife of revenge even deeper. He throws them all into prison, then after a few days lets them go home with their grain but takes one brother hostage, ordering them to return with Benjamin. Then Joseph he secretly puts their money back in each sack; when they get home and find it they're badly shaken up, terrified they could be accused of stealing.

The famine goes on and soon they need more grain, so over their father's desperate objections they take Benjamin back to Egypt on the next trip. This time Joseph plays an even meaner trick, secretly placing his own silver goblet in Benjamin's bag. As the brothers start for home Joseph sends soldiers to apprehend them, accusing them of stealing the goblet and saying whoever's bag it's in must be his slave for life. Of course it's found in Benjamin's sack. The panicked brothers are bereft, saying their father cannot bear to lose Benjamin. They bare their soul in a heart-rending plea for mercy, recounting all the trauma Joseph has put them through.

At this Joseph finally breaks down, weeping so loudly that the entire household of Pharaoh hears it. Then we arrive at today's reading: "Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph.' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence."

The word for "dismayed" really means trembling inwardly. They are thinking: "This powerful man is our brother? The one we tried to do away with so many years before? Is he about to finish us off for the evil we did?" They expect the worst. What should have been a moment of joyful discovery and reunion is instead one in which the terror has been ramped up exponentially, because hostility—the interaction of enemies—is pretty much all that this family has ever known.

As we heard the brothers go on to become reconciled, but I have to say that I detect Joseph's continuing arrogance in the way he rationalizes the brothers' past bad behavior. Joseph tells them, don't be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here—it was all part of God's plan to preserve life. It was not you who sent me here to Egypt, but God.

Does God's plan really require people to suffer? Was Joseph's enslavement part of God's plan? His father's anguish? If you follow this line of thinking, couldn't the claim be made throughout history that various forms of enslavement might also been part of God's plan? At least initially when he lost his freedom, Joseph himself must have suffered. God NEVER desires for God's people to suffer or to be treated inhumanely. Did Joseph also think it was part of God's plan for him to repeatedly terrify his brothers, who were only trying to buy grain to keep their household from starvation? What if Joseph had died of a heart attack in his anxiety over possibly losing Benjamin? Would that have been part of God's plan?

With those questions, I am not sure what lesson the story of Joseph really has to tell us. All we can be certain of is that cultivating hostility, making enemies, always leads to death—the death of relationships. Genesis concludes by telling us that Jacob's entire family moved to Egypt where they prospered, but we must remember that a generation or two later when a new

Pharaoh took over they all suddenly found themselves enslaved by the Egyptians, a story we will leave for the Book of Exodus.

How might the story of Joseph gone if this family had embraced the principles of life in the kingdom of God as Jesus lays them out in Luke 6? Not just love people generally, but love especially those who try to make enemies of you. Never seek revenge—in fact, here, hit me on the other cheek. I discover you've stolen something from me? Well, what else do I have that you'd like? He borrowed my wheelbarrow and never returned it? Well, he must really need it. You like my long coat of many colors? I'll let each of you wear it for a week. I see you coming, my long-lost brothers, to buy grain that I am able to provide? Here, let me throw off all my silver and gold so that I can embrace you fully before we do anything else. Family is everything!

Jesus is not laying out a plan for prescriptive morality, telling people how they should and should not act. Rather, Jesus is asking them to accept the inversion of the entire world order. Remember, it's still Opposite Day! And remember, too, that here Jesus is not just talking to the disciples—he's standing on the plain with a great multitude from across Judea and Jerusalem and Tyre and Sidon fanning out, all hanging on his every word.

Did they listen? Do we listen? Do we even know how to listen? This call to reject our baser human instincts and embrace an entirely new way of being in community together is just as startling, and seemingly impossible to live out, now as it was then.

It's good that Jesus did not lay these down as laws, for we would stumble and fall even before we left the gate. Instead he is offering us an invitation to new life, a richer life, a more abundant life. The key lies in verse 36: Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. We have all experienced God's mercy, that amazing grace by which God continues to love us even when we fail to love him, even when we hurl our own family members into pits by unkind words or thoughtless actions. Even then God never abandons us. God always forgives and is always calling us back.

And when we can show that same mercy to others, that is where we find our experience of new and abundant life. As the beautiful last verse of today's Gospel tells us, a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap.

Amen.