

Looking for Loopholes

GENESIS 45:1-15 (NRSV) *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. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph 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. ⁴Then 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For 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. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So 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. ⁹Hurry 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. ¹⁰You 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. ¹¹I 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.' ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

ROMANS 11:1-2A, 29-32 (NRSV) *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. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. . . . ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but*

have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

The movie actor and comedian, W. C. Fields, had a reputation as a heavy drinker, smoker, womanizer; and had a vocabulary spiced with Tabasco. According to one story, a friend found him reading the Bible one day, and in shock, asked, "What are you doing?" His response was, "Looking or loopholes."

Last Sunday I was kind of oblivious—vaguely aware that something had happened in Charlottesville, Virginia. By Monday morning, of course, it dominated my awareness—the intensity of the tragic anger and hatred that is devouring us; and the sense of numbness that grows with each succeeding act of senseless violence.

And I thought about those lost lives; and how all people seem to be able to do in response is to point fingers and blame everybody who is different in any way from themselves. Nobody seems willing to be accountable—there's general denial—nobody owns up to being complicit in the formation of our culture of violence and hatred—whether by overt action, or consenting silence, or just by benefiting from

the system. And, so, hatred multiplies; and these events just keep coming.

For the remainder of the week I did what I usually do when my spirit is overwhelmed: I wrote. Some of you responded to my blog and to my Facebook posts; and your responses were affirming. Thank you for that.

I'm still angrier than I can remember. But I found some focus in the words of another blogger, whose words consistently minister to my spirit. She wrote:

"This is not what we are made for—this vicious hate and unending rage at one another. The people of color that I love are scared. ... And I am desperate for something to ease their fear. Desperate for the right words and actions to help them feel safe. Held. Loved. No matter what. I feel woefully insufficient in this regard. ... I cannot know (their) pain. But how I wish I could stop it."¹

Well, I had to get ready for today. People expect—people deserve—to hear a word from the Lord in times like these. Could the Lord work around my anger?

When I tried to put words together for the Lord's Table, that's when it hit me hardest. For us Disciples, the communion table is not ours to define. It's God's. And that means all are welcome. And "I was thinking about those people who held those torches and said those awful things and cast that awful fear. (But) here's the thing: God loves them, too. I can't. But God does."²

If there is a collective theme in all the readings from today's lectionary it is that all of them speak of God's mercy. And each presents a scenario in which God's mercy promotes human reconciliation.

If anybody had reason to hate and seek revenge, Joseph did. He was the eleventh son of Jacob, and the favorite. Jacob spoiled him rotten, and he was a real brat; flaunted his favoritism at every opportunity, and his brothers' hatred grew until it reached critical mass, and exploded. They were going to kill him, but the eldest brother stepped in.

Instead of killing him, they sold him to a slave trader bound for Egypt, where he became the house boy of Pharaoh's Captain of the Guard, whose wife took a likin' to him and came on to him. When he rejected her advances, she screamed, "Rape!" and nobody questioned her. Joseph was put in prison.

But God was with him, and when Pharaoh had some troubling dreams, Joseph interpreted them, and lead Egypt to prepare for an impending drought and famine. As a result, Joseph grew to become second only to Pharaoh in power and authority.

The famine was widespread—reaching Jacob's family back in Canaan. Joseph's brothers went to Egypt to buy food, and he recognized them. He really could

¹ <https://someonestolemycoffee.wordpress.com/2017/08/14/to-our-knees/>

² Ibid.

have done the revenge thing; in fact, he did play with their heads for a bit. But, his awareness of God was stronger, and in the text this morning we read one of the Bible's great passages of love and forgiveness and reconciliation.

Even those who betrayed him and sold him into slavery, Joseph forgave. Centuries later, in that same spirit, Jesus would say, "Love your enemies;" and Paul, in Romans 12, would repeat that exhortation: "Love your enemies." Crystal clear.

But, people look for loopholes. Now, there are some good things in John Calvin's contribution to Christianity; but, also one of the greatest distortions. His idea of the total depravity of man led many Christian groups into an obsession with being justified, not by faith (which is the cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation), but by human determination to be morally and theologically "right."

As a result, that expression of faith has become not enough about seeking truth and living in the freedom of that truth; and far too much about justifying what we've already decided to believe and do and be; because, you see, the assumption is that we already know the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. And we're right!

In that narrow perspective, faith is not about following Jesus and molding the world into his vision of love and unity; it's about getting me and my family into heaven. It's not about trusting that God, in Christ already has accomplished that; it's about proving I'm right and therefore God has to let me in. That's not grace.

And if I'm right; then anyone who differs is wrong, and must be corrected—or defeated or eliminated. And the grace of God as expressed in the story of Joseph and the life of Jesus, gets lost in the chaotic obsession with self-justification. And Charlottesville happens. Because "I'm right; and I have to prevail."

That whole process cannot happen in a context consistent with the Gospel: "It is by grace that we have been saved (and even that grace is not of our own devising. It is a gift of God), not by works; therefore, we have no room to boast—no basis for self-justification" (Ephesians 2:8 Robinson translation). Crystal clear.

But, those obsessed with self-confirmation look for loopholes. There's a lot of "Yeah, but..." A lot of finger-pointing and shifting of blame ("It all started when he hit me back!") A lot of comparing my evil with yours, and insisting that mine isn't as bad as yours. A lot of denial: denial of science; denial of history; denial of racism; hatred; accountability... And those who sing "Amazing Grace" the loudest sometimes are the ones whose words and actions deny it the most.

So, what can we do? In the story of Joseph...

- I. ...he remained humble. He was second in authority in all Egypt; but, didn't use that authority to lord it over those who had betrayed him and had plotted to kill him. In humility, we can refuse to live in denial: we can openly admit...

- a. ...we don't know it all; we walk by faith, not by sight; and we might get it wrong from time-to-time.
 - b. ...we participate in, and benefit from, a broken, dysfunctional system.
- II. Joseph demonstrated the Love of Enemies in which Christ later would call his followers to live. In today's Epistle reading, Paul reaffirms that God's extravagant grace is lavished freely to all. We can refuse to be part of the problem: we can encourage each other in the accomplishment of Jesus ultimate model of love and grace: "Love your enemies."
- III. Joseph took the initiative to reconcile, even though He was the one who was wronged! On the cross, Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them; for they know not what they do." We can refuse to be dragged down to the level of those who hate. "Do not be overcome with evil; but overcome evil with good" (Romans 12:21).
- IV. 3500 years after Joseph demonstrated it, we Disciples claimed our identity as a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world. Not only can we refuse to participate in a broken system; we can initiate positive, reconciling action. We can decide to make a difference, one act of kindness at a time.
- V. We can refuse to be discouraged. The challenge is overwhelming, if we look at it from a global perspective. Remember that parable of the little boy and the starfish? ...
- VI. We can pray. Prayer unites us. Prayer aligns our wills and our lives with the will and the life of God, and we are equipped to live out the prayer we pray every Sunday: "Thy kingdom come; thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."