

February 24, 2019

Rev. Dr. Jean Halligan Vandergrift

"Try Mercy"

THE INTRODUCTIONS & READINGS

JEAN: The first book of the Bible is Genesis - a word that means "beginning." Through the stories of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants, the book of Genesis intends to tell us who God is and who we are. God made a sacred covenant with Abraham and Sarah, promising that they would not only survive, but by following God's ways, become a blessing to all the peoples of the earth.

Today we join the story of their great grandchildren: Joseph and his eleven brothers. When these boys were younger, Joseph was particularly gifted and kind of spoiled. He was able to interpret dreams and was often the star of his own interpretations. This confidence drove his older brothers crazy with jealousy. To skip ahead, they sold Joseph into slavery to a passing caravan and lied to their father, Jacob, reporting that a wild animal had killed his favorite son.

Years passed, and amazingly, Joseph survived in Egypt. But his family didn't know it. Due to his charisma and abilities, Joseph gained favor with Pharaoh himself. At one point, Joseph foresaw a terrible drought and instructed the Egyptian authorities to plan ahead and store grain. He was put in charge of its distribution.

When the drought worsened and spread, Egypt had sufficient food for its people *and* enough to sell others. This is why Joseph's brothers traveled from Canaan to Egypt. They didn't recognize Joseph at all, but he knew who they were.

What would he do with his anger and bitterness over the wrong they had done to him?

Joseph wanted to see his father and his brother, Benjamin, so after a series of tests, Joseph reveals himself to his guilty siblings.

THE FIRST READING - Genesis 45:3-15

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.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.

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.'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.

ANNABELLE: Jesus would have been very familiar with the Patriarchs and Matriarchs of his people. He also knew well the story of Joseph: the evil that his brothers had done to him *and* Joseph's incredible ability to show them mercy and forgive them. Because of Joseph, the people of Israel – Jesus' people – were welcomed into Egypt and settled there in safety.

At this point in the gospel of Luke, Jesus has called his twelve apostles, and he wants to give them special instructions. The crowds also flock around Jesus. When they are gathered on the plain, he teaches them about the kind of behavior that befits those who are entering the Kingdom of God. After pronouncing the blessings and woes that we heard about last Sunday, Jesus described the ethical standards that his disciples ought to follow, even when they live under the oppression of the Romans! Like Joseph, they are to attempt reconciliation with those who have wronged them.

THE SECOND READING – [Luke 6:27-36](#)

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. ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

SERMON

Somewhere in the world today, a woman is being manipulated into a life of prostitution; a parent is verbally abusing a son; an elder adult is not receiving the respect she deserves. We can also be sure that somewhere a civilian will fall victim to war, an employee will steal from the company, and a spouse will have to decide whether to forgive an affair. Jesus knew that people wrong one another – hurt and sin against each other. He realized too that these situations would present ethical dilemmas for his followers: “What should we *do*? How should we *act*? What is a Christian ethical response?”

Whenever people are wronged, I think they usually respond in one of two ways: One of these is to adopt an ethic of revenge – some kind of retaliation, returning evil for evil. It’s certainly tempting to get back at the one who has hurt us. I’m inclined to call this ethic “the *Red Rule*,” because in anger, it is doing unto others as they have done unto us.

It is very likely that in our Genesis story, Joseph had thoughts of revenge against his brothers! Don’t you think that the Dreamer entertained fantasies of throwing his brothers into a pit and leaving *them* to die as they had to him? There was no justice or court system for Joseph to employ, so why wouldn’t he consider taking matters into his own hands?

In Jesus’ day, members of the Zealot revolutionary party, intent on ousting the Roman Empire, followed the Red Rule of revenge. Some of these fighters were attracted by Jesus’ message of liberation and by his power to galvanize and inspire people. On the plain that day, as he taught the crowds, these folks would have been listening to him to hear whether *his* ethics allowed for and approved of a violent overthrow of the Roman occupiers.

The other way people often respond when they have been wronged is with an ethic of avoidance. They steer clear of the perpetrator, or put some distance between them and this one. Denying and trying to forget what has happened also falls into this category. We avoid the work of hard work of healing and forgiveness. I’m inclined to think of this ethical choice as following “the *Gray Rule*:” Neither black or white. In the middle. Do nothing unto the others who have done you wrong.

Joseph opted to follow this ethic for a good long time. Granted, in those early years as a slave, he had no way to escape Egypt, so time passed without meeting his brothers. Even once he had the means and the power to leave, he still stayed away from Canaan and that

painful past. He also had time in this absence to interpret what had happened to him theologically, deciding that some good had come from his brothers' crime after all: he had become able to save people's lives during the famine. Overall, I view Joseph as having decided to avoid contact with his family, to live and let live, and put the past behind him.

There are cases, of course, as in domestic violence, when it is *best* to put distance between you and your enemy instead of staying and trying to make the best of a bad situation, or loving him in the old pattern. This kind of escape takes courage. But the vast majority of us – would you agree? – follow the Gray Rule out of fear, or because it is easier – the path of least resistance. Like Jesus' people in Palestine, we go along with the Romans in order to get along.

Tragically, the Church – not only Catholic, but Protestant, and Orthodox – has been guilty of avoidance: sweeping stories of abuse under the rug, moving clerics from one parish to another, and not facing its own cultural complicity in sin. Avoidance is not what Jesus prescribes.

Jesus put forward a different ethic. He invited his listeners to adopt an alternative response to those who wrong them. Biblical scholar, Walter Wink, called it "a *third way*," in contrast to "fight or flight."¹ Jesus said: Love your enemies. Do good to those who harm you. Bless and pray for them. When the creditor forces you to give up your coat, shock him by giving up your shirt too. Be merciful as God is merciful. Let the character of God ground your ethic.

I know it goes counter to all our instincts, but Jesus is saying: "When someone sins against you, try mercy; give reconciliation a chance. Instead of getting trapped in the Red or the Gray, try the *Golden Rule*: Do unto others as you would want them to do to you."

The word "mercy" in the Old and New Testament derives from the root for "womb," suggesting that divine compassion comes from a deep place, and it manifests in acts of grace and love toward others.² So the ethic of mercy requires that we come to awareness about our own pain in order to empathize with others. We also have to know what we would want done to us in order to take the next step of imagining what they want and need. Mercy means seeing them with new eyes – as *more than* murderers, abusers, and thieves – as children of God too. Adopting an ethic of mercy requires letting God's mercy inside *you* and into your ethical dilemmas in order to perceive the next possible step.

¹Walter Wink, *Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003). This is a great treatment of Jesus' teachings and the context in which he said them. For example, see chapter two to better understand what his listeners would have heard when he said, "turn the other cheek," "go the second mile," and "give up your shirt as well." Wink makes the case that these were forms of nonviolent resistance. In chapter five, he illuminates the deeper, theological rationale of love and forgiveness of our enemies for Christian behavior. He also offers stories about successful movements of nonviolent resistance.

²E.R. Achtemeier, "Mercy," *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), 352-354.

Now, I'm sure that hands with questions are eager to go up. Let's see if we can briefly deal with a few here.

Jesus does *not* guarantee that mercy will instantaneously 'work,' nor in all circumstances. Showing mercy is neither the same as blanket amnesty; it includes accountability. Jesus also doesn't prescribe a step-by-step, one-size-fits-all method of mercy. Acting in this manner takes time; it's a process, and one of trial and error.

I encourage you to read the full story of Joseph and his brothers, starting at chapter 41 and going on through 50. You'll find out that Joseph didn't reveal himself immediately to his brothers. His arms weren't wide open in welcome at the beginning; he protected himself a bit, but he immediately extended mercy to them by giving them food to keep them all alive. Then, over a couple of iterations, he tested their remorse and trustworthiness. Eventually, Joseph allowed himself to feel again: to long for his father and younger brother, to feel tenderness toward his guilty brothers, and to feel the loss of all those years and what could've been. Joseph wept. Then he told them who he was. This is how mercy eventually opened the door to reconciliation in his case.

**What would trying mercy look like today in your life and relationships?
What steps of mercy could you take in this world of wrongs? Try it.**

In one of Dr. King's lesser-known sermons, "Unfulfilled Dreams," he acknowledges our human limits, imperfections, and the trouble we have reaching our ideals, like this ethic from Jesus. Sometimes we are thwarted in doing this, but God knows our hearts and notices when we make the effort.

King preached: "He may not have reached the highest height, he may not have realized all of his dreams, but he tried. Isn't that a wonderful thing for somebody to say about you?"³

³Delivered at Ebenezer Baptist Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on 3 March 1968.