

ST. JOHN'S AT DIOCESAN CENTER IGLESIA EPISCOPAL DE SAN JUAN

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WHAT GOD DOES

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Text of a Sermon preached the Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

February 20, 2022

GENESIS 45:3-11, 25 | PSALM 37:1-12, 41-42
I CORINTHIANS 15:35-38, 42-50 | LUKE 6:27-38

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.

Here ends the first book of the Bible. After the spectacular journeys of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it is finally up to

the children to keep or destroy the calling and the promises they have been given. So Joseph faces his brothers. Out of envy they sell him into slavery. By grace he becomes a prince of Egypt. And in showing great wisdom, Joseph is able to not to crush his brothers with shame by revealing what they did, but instead, gather the family back together. In this way, not only is everyone reconciled. Even more. The story will not end here. The story will continue. God outwits the sinfulness of his own chosen people and saves them from famine and disaster, certain extinction at all the forces greater than them.

Joseph will declare: What you meant for ill, God meant for good. It is a mysterious principle. It does not mean that every bad thing, every evil, can be excused or has a purpose. It means that if we understand God's will, his intention for us, then we can understand the difficult things that happen to us. But even more it means that our actions resisting suffering and evil are very much a part of God's will. We must begin to think and act as God would, to understand God's heart. When Joseph forgives his brothers, he saves himself as well. Joseph could feel in his gut this truth: forgive the one standing in front of you because, not if but when, you are going to need him down the road.

Rabbi Joshua Abraham Heschel, one of the greatest spiritual teachers of the last century, noted that in the very first chapter of the bible God gave us a key to his intentions. "God created a reminder, an image. Humanity is a reminder of God. As God is compassionate, let humanity be compassionate." If we forget what the bible says, we just need look at one another.

Whenever we have forgotten, God has conspired for us to remember. See here. Here is our brother, our sister, standing in front of us. We might remember Jacob, who when finally reconciled to his brother Esau blurted out: "When I see your face I see the face of God." Like Joseph when he first saw the brothers who sold him into slavery said simply: "Come closer to me." Like Israel, who sent his remaining sons down into Egypt thinking he might never see them again, hearing: "Joseph is still alive." God conspires to bring back things dead to us, providing a new reminder each day in the presence of our neighbor.

Then, in the fullness of time, God revealed a whole new creation, a new image: God gave us his first born Son Jesus. Today we are listening to his words, as he comes down to a level place to meet us, to tell us how to orient ourselves when our neighbor is standing there, in need. Jesus' words from the plain, with the crowds pressing in on him, startle and unsettle.

We may still be trying to figure out why and how the poor and hungry are blessed and the rich and contented are in trouble. We may still be getting our head around why Jesus would come down the mountain, stand in front of his disciples and open with, get ready, you will be persecuted, but, don't worry, be happy. Jesus continues, reading from the employee manual of those who have decided to follow him: lend not expecting anything in return. Forgive and do not judge. Oh, and by the way, love your enemies.

None of this makes obvious sense unless we realize that Jesus is trying to tell us, that as he has it on good authority, that this not only is what God wants, this is what God is like. God really does love everyone. God really has no favorites. God really does want everyone to be saved. God sends sunshine and rain on the just and the unjust. And how is anyone to know that unless we do exactly as God does. Forgive your brother and sisters, stupid, and stop judging. The abundant overflowing love of God awaits you if you do.

This is the bigger picture of the sermon on the plain. Jesus tells us to understand the heart of God, and then the story then can proceed, then we take our place in the story.

A pastor friend once told me a somewhat comical tale of when he was walking with his son in downtown Philly and decided that they wanted to order a pizza so it would be ready for them when they got back home, about a half hour drive from where they were. Just then they were passing by a man asking for a handout. The pastor reached in his pocket and pulled out all his change, and offered it to the man. He said: "Take what you need." The beggar, somewhat surprised, said, "well I'll take it all." And so he did. The only problem was, this was back in the day when the only way to order pizza in downtown Philly to be delivered to the suburbs was to find a phone booth to make a

call. Not a few steps later, the son realized this and said, “Dad, we don’t have a quarter to make the call!”

So the father, went back to the man and asked: “You don’t by any chance have any spare change. I need to make a phone call.” The gentleman looked at him, pulled out all the change from his pocket and said: “Take what you need.”

I suppose we might think of any problem, from homelessness, to climate change – to negotiating with Vladimir Putin – and learn a little something from this parable. Just like Joseph, we should forgive and make provision for the one in front of us, because we don’t know when we are going to need him down the road.

As our Lord was trying to tell us, above all, your salvation is about what God wants you to become. The seed of our sinful humanity must die, to be resurrected into the image of our Risen Savior. Our first step today is to begin to think and then act as God would. And that means that there is more than enough to go around. There is something today that we have, that our brother needs, that we shall be reminded to gladly give.