

Sermon – Turning Bad into Good

Genesis 45: 1-15, Romans 8: 28-30, can be used for Cor Villa

Members of a family sometimes pull pranks on one another. For example, one summer my uncle and grandfather, who were dry-land cotton farmers, couldn't find anyone to hoe weeds in their cotton fields. It was the summer between my junior and senior year in high school, and so I was drafted to go "chop cotton," which I rather enjoyed. I swing a rather mean hoe if I say so myself.

One afternoon I was finishing a row of cotton, rounding the last couple of stalks to go back the other way hoeing another row, when suddenly I noticed that I was about to step on a rattlesnake. I couldn't avoid it. So, what did I do? Well, have you seen these Chinese martial arts films in which the characters jump three stories in the air to continue their chase or fight? I have no idea how they do that, but that's what I did, and when I came down, my uncle, who was sitting on the tailgate of his pickup having a drink of water and a laugh at my expense, told me that my cousin, who was several years older than I was and working in another field, had killed the snake earlier, coiled it and placed it where I couldn't avoid it. The cotton stalks and weeds were tall enough and thick enough at that point to obscure my vision rounding the corner.

So, that night, I'm in bed with the window open at my grandparents' house when I hear my cousin scream. This is West Texas farm country, flat as a tabletop,

voices carry a long way. And I knew what had happened. At midnight my cousin got out of bed and drove his pickup to the fields to change the irrigation water. To move the pipes, he had to reach into the glovebox to get his flashlight. And wrapped around that flashlight was the body of the snake he'd left for me that afternoon. I wondered how it got there and went back to sleep.

Family members sometimes play tricks on each other. And I think that what Joseph's brothers did to him could have been the beginning of a great prank. Take his technicolor dream coat, throw him in a pit, and then sell him into slavery to Midianite traders on their way to Egypt. But for it to have been a prank, they would have had to buy him back after a few days or weeks at the most. They didn't, and what they did to him turned into a matter of teaching him a lesson that he was fortunate to have survived. For at that time being sold into slavery was a death sentence. By and large slaves were soon starved and worked to death.

And teach him a lesson for what? His dad Jacob had twelve sons with two wives and two concubines. And Joseph was his favorite. Father Jacob loved Joseph more so than his older boys because he was a "son of his old age." With each of the ten older boys – and Joseph was eleventh in line, Benjamin twelfth – Father Jacob could have sung, "My child arrived just the other day, He came to the world in the usual way, but there were planes to catch, and bills to pay. He learned to walk while I was away. And he was talking 'fore I knew it, and as he grew, He'd say 'I'm

gonna be like you, dad.' You know I'm gonna be like you." That was the older boys experience of their father, but by the time Joseph came along, Jacob was semi-retired and able to throw the ball with him of an evening. They were close. Indeed, Joseph "came home from college one fine day, So much like a man Jacob had to say, Son, I'm proud of you, can you sit for a while? He shook his head, and he said with a smile. What I'd really like, dad, is to borrow the car keys, See you later, can I have them please?"

Joseph got away with all sorts of things that older his brothers didn't, plus he was arrogant. And truly he was talented, but there are some things you should keep to yourself. Zip your lip. One day he actually told his brothers one of his dreams. "There we were binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright: then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." Which they interpreted as his saying that one day he would rule over them. Sure, he would. Shortly after that, they sold him into slavery.

Time goes by, and instead of being worked to death as a slave, Joseph rises to be second in charge in Egypt, just below Pharoah. What helped his rise was that God enabled him to interpret dreams and advise Pharoah, as in there would be seven years of plenty followed by seven years of drought. During the seven years of plenty, vast reserves of grain were harvested and stored in Egypt. The drought then hit, not only in Egypt but also in Canaan where Joseph's family lived. Father

Jacob soon sends his sons to Egypt to buy grain to keep the family from starving, which gives Joseph a chance to get his revenge. He doesn't, though. Oh, he does have a bit of fun with his brothers. Puts dead asps in their coin sacks, but then he loses it. He breaks down and weeps so loudly that the household of Pharaoh hears him saying to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers were so dismayed by his presence they could not answer."

And here's a takeaway. Joseph tells them that their selling him into slavery was none other than God at work to preserve their family as a remnant on earth. It was how God kept the story going that started with their great-grandparents Abraham and Sarah. What we have here is an illustration of the Christian belief that nothing can happen to us that God cannot use for our good. Do you believe that? Nothing can happen to us that God cannot use for our good. Hard to believe at times. You have to accept that such things as disease, accidents, financial harm, and losing out on fun can produce spiritual wellbeing. The brothers are glad to hear that he feels like he does and ask what's next. Joseph says, "Call the Moving Caravan Co. and move all the family to Egypt." The brothers say, "Land O'Goshen! That's good news!" to which Joseph says, "Actually, it's where you're going to be living." And thus, as the biblical story unfolds, the descendants of Abraham and Sarah don't starve to death but find themselves living in Egypt.

The Apostle Paul in our second scripture lesson may have had the story of Joseph and his brothers in mind when he wrote, “We know that in all things God works for good for those who love God,” the word *those* referring to the church, “those who are called according to his purposes.” And what would that good be? Well, in the very next verse Paul says that we are “to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first born within a large family,” the church. In all things God works for our good, to the end that we in the church become more Christlike. So, we need to work with God rather than against God.

Now, did you notice that when Joseph made himself known to his brothers, he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, including the household of Pharaoh? That’s some loud weeping, isn’t it? When I went to seminary, a number of us married students lived in houses on the side of a hill that swept down into a hollow with a creek running through it. We didn’t have much air conditioning, and so we often kept our windows open. There was a young lady, the wife of a student, who lived in the hollow who when she sneezed, sneezed so loudly that everyone heard her. This was before cellphones, and so everyone would get on the landline and say, “Gezundheit!” She sneezed and everyone graciously offered her a tissue.

Likewise, people in Pharaoh’s household heard Joseph weeping and came to his aid. “Here’s a hankie, made with Egyptian Cotton, the softest most durable cotton in the world,” which was nice of them. And so Joseph shared his joy. Told

them how his brothers sold him into slavery years earlier, and now that they had reunited how he was now giving them land in nearby Goshen. Which the Egyptians did not understand. Such forgiveness Pharaoh's household would not have understood at all. Joseph should kill his brothers in revenge and be done with it. They'll be happy to help. It is amazing what some people can forgive and what others can't.

Do you remember Clara Barton, the self-taught nurse who provided so much care during the Civil War and then went on to establish the Red Cross? One time her secretary came to her with a note from a lady inviting her to a social function at the lady's house. Clara Barton replied yes, she would be in attendance. The secretary was surprised. She said, "How can you possibly go to her house? Don't you remember how shabbily she treated you the last time you were around her? All the terrible things she said about you?"

Clara Barton answered, "No. I distinctly remember forgetting."

God has a big advantage when it comes to forgiveness. God can just haul off and forget. "*I am The One who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will not remember your sins.*" Isaiah 43:25. We should be so capable. We can forget names, appointments, trigonometric identities, and which is worse, a third degree burn or a first degree. A sin or offense against us, though, is different. Hard to forget. Now, we may feel that we're on the way toward forgiveness when we

haven't thought about the offense for some time, but then we wake up one morning upset anew. The rage hasn't gone away. It's just been on vacation. To forgive we still have work to do with God's help via prayer. God, help me forgive this person.

In Mt. 18: 21, 22, Peter asked Jesus, "*Lord, if a person sins against me, how often should I forgive? Seven times?*" Jesus said, *'Not seven times, but I tell you seventy times seven.'*" E.g., as many times as the person offends you. But what if Peter had asked Jesus instead, "*Lord, if a person sins against me just once, how many times must I attempt to forgive this person before I succeed?*" Might not Jesus also say, "*Not seven times, but seventy times seven*"? Again, however many times it takes. Take the matter to God in prayer again and again and again. Let God wear down your hard heartedness. Seek God's help to turn your focus anywhere but upon the offense. It's worth the struggle. Didn't Paul just say that in all things God works for our good? And isn't forgiving others good? Let's work with God.

Some people say that only chumps forgive others. Offenders don't deserve mercy such as Joseph showed his brothers. But how about Joseph? How about the person who suffered the offense, the one to whom better was owed? Doesn't he/she deserve a break? Many of us have found that if we don't forgive, we allow the offender to keep causing us grief as we continue looking back at what happened. It's like we're driving a car and aren't giving sufficient attention to the life ahead because our eyes are focused in the rearview mirror. There are

experiences to enjoy, decisions to make, a life to be lived; yet we spend time and energy dwelling upon a painful incident in the past? Who's the chump? The one who forgives or the one who doesn't? Clara Barton's secretary asked her, "Don't you remember how that woman treated you?"... "No, I distinctly remember forgetting." Well, maybe why she distinctly remembers is that it took her seventy times seven prayers before she was successful. A lot of work into forgiving the lady. Clara Barton worked hard with God because nothing can happen to us that God cannot use for our good. Amen