

“When the Divine is Behind Bad Deals and Deeds”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Pentecost, Sunday, August 14, 2011

James L. Brewer-Calvert, Senior Pastor

Holy Scriptures: Genesis 45: 1-15

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. 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.

Making lemonade

A friend was driving down a side street

when she saw a small group of children around a lemonade stand.

She pulled over and approached the children.

The hand-drawn sign announced that their product

was fresh squeezed, homemade, ice cold, and only 50 cents a glass.

She asked the oldest child, who looked around 8, how the lemonade was made.

“Well,” the girl said importantly, “I open the mix and add it to some water and then put in a few ice cubes and then I carefully stir it. Let me show you.”

At this point she put her arm in the pitcher up to her elbow,
and began to swirl it around the lemonade.

My friend pulled out a dollar and said, *“I’ll take two.”*

Making lemonade

What does cultural wisdom suggest you do when life gives you lemons?

How is that working for you?

Let’s be honest and authentic this morning.

Throughout the Gospels, Jesus Christ is emphatic that He detests plastic churches,

inauthentic worship and fake religiosity.

So let’s be real, right here and now.

How are you coping with life’s lemons?

Sometimes okay, sometimes not so okay?

I can relate.

And what does the Church tell you about when bad things happen to good folks?

We are to give thanks that, through thick and thin, God is with us.

Yes, indeed!

Jesus Christ was sent by God to walk with us,

to save us and redeem us and forgive us and aid us in our sufferings

and guide us toward a new life in the grace of God.

“Jesus loves you, this I know, for the Bible tells me so.”

And the Bible is clear – crystal – about God’s love in Christ Jesus

from which nothing can separate us.

The Apostle Paul was on fire with inspiration and insight when he pointed out:

35 Who will separate us from the love of Christ?

Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

37 No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

38 For I am convinced that neither death, nor life,

nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present,

nor things to come, nor powers,

39 nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation,

will be able to separate us

from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8: 35, 37-39)

To this body of disciples we belong.

Christ invites us to belong, and then to behave, and in due course to work out our belief.

Belonging to the Body provides for support.

Behaving as responsible, loving creations of God provides a basis for growth.

The belief part is what is going to help us when we find ourselves in times of trouble.

Here we are, doing our best, making lemonade out of lemons.

Our arms are all in the pitcher and we're stirring our hearts out.

And yet...

And yet, contrary to traditional systematic theology and teaching,

in contrast to what our forbearers have learned, gleaned and passed down,

deep down inside we often may feel otherwise.

Especially when you feel betrayed by those you trusted.

Especially when you get used or abused or misused.

Especially when you are kicked out or kicked off or kicked aside.

Especially when it is the ones you love – or once loved -- who hurt you the most:

your church, your friends, your family, your nation, your God...

Especially when the cancer returns,

or the bills pile up,

or the resume you put so much energy into is simply ignored,

or the alone-ness in your life is so strong you can

cut it with a knife,

and you would expect that you feel like you
can't cut it any more.

And where is God?

You want to shout like the mother did who has five children with the flu
and a deployed husband, saying, "*O God, why me?*"

Except when you look around God ain't there.

Deep down inside you might be thinking no answer will come, anyway.

Why bother?

Making lemonade

Our passage from Genesis 45 is the centerpiece of the entire Joseph narrative.

We find him confronting his brothers who, years earlier,

had sold him into slavery.

Now Joseph has power over them;

he can turn the tables and cast them out,

which might be the sweet revenge that he's fantasized
about

for lo these many years.

Instead, as Joseph speaks to them, he's overcome with the moment.

He reveals his true self.

He stops playing games.

He starts to see that this experience is cosmic, transformational,
that a Spirit greater than all of them is at work.

"Come closer to me," Joseph said to his brothers.

They came closer.

"I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt.

But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me.

God was behind it.

God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.

There has been a famine in the land now for two years;

the famine will continue for five more years

—neither plowing nor harvesting.

God sent me on ahead to pave the way

and make sure there was a remnant in the land,

to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance.

So you see,

it wasn't you who sent me here but God.

He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh,

*put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of
all Egypt."*

(Genesis 45: 4-8, *The Message*)

Joseph sees suddenly that all the while he felt abandoned by God,
instead the Lord had sent him to be a solution
to a greater challenge, a greater mission, a greater purpose.

First thing he had to do was to stop hiding.

He needed to be true to himself.

Maybe God isn't the one in hiding...

Who needs to know the real you?

Why have you been hesitant to reveal your true identity, your deepest joys
and purpose, to your family, your friends, to the ones whom God has
placed before you?

Where is God sending you to clear up confusion?

to do community service?

to be a witness?

to be the answer to someone else's prayers?

All the while we are bemoaning our suffering the Lord is saying, in effect,

"Yes, I hear you, I am with you, so enough already!"

You may have had something terrible happen to you

or you may have done something bad yourself.

Be sorry, confess and profess but don't obsess! Don't overdo it.

*Remember that I am still God,
and I will bring out of you and this situation a new life and a new
hope!”*

Good news! The love of God will redeem our suffering.

Give yourself the gift of a deep faith that “*suffering produces endurance,*

and endurance produces character,

and character produces hope,

and hope does not disappoint us,

because God’s love has been poured into our hearts

*through the Holy Spirit that has been given to
us.” (Romans 5: 3-4)*

In a Doonesbury comic strip, a father is lamenting his hard life.

He is talking with his hip daughter.

He says, “*What is it about this year, Alex? The divorce, crisis at work,*

*now my girlfriend has another man...it is like bad news just follows
me around.”*

She says, “*I know how you feel, Pop.”*

Startled, he says, “*You do?”*

“*Yes. This morning I dumped a whole glass of milk into my scrambled
eggs.”*

“*Well, exactly.”*

“I almost cried, but then I thought, ‘Hey, quiche!’”

Making lemonade

Do you ever feel as if God is in hiding?

Do you ever think that there are times and experiences in your life

when God is absent, distant, silent, far, far away, non-existent, even?

After the liberation of Poland by the Allies in 1945,

Three sentences were found written on the dark, damp basement wall in Warsaw.

These three sentences were most likely written

by a Jew in hiding as she or he waited in the cold and dark

for liberation from unseen forces of hope.

“I believe in the Sun even when it is not shining.

I believe in love even when I do not feel it.

I believe in God even when I do not see Him.”

Tell me about your relationship with the divine.

Is it such that you have a sense of the holy in every waking moment?

Or are you like my friend and mentor Yushi Nomura

who describes his walk with God

as like one with a good friend along a crowded street?

Sometimes Yushi is walking close to God, shoulder to shoulder,
and sometimes other people or things come between them,
and so for a while even though they walk in the
same direction,
they are slightly apart
yet sensing one another across the distance of the
wide sidewalk.

Or maybe your faith journey is more like Joseph's in the narrative from
Genesis?

Joseph catches a glimpse of God's providential care
more so in his past than in his present.

He glances in his rear view mirror
and discovers modern insights from his yesterdays,
insights one gleans after reflection and looking back
over the roads and miles and journeys travelled.

Walter Brueggemann reminds us how difficult it is for people,
people like Joseph then and us today,
to believe that God is at work
even in the dark and most destructive moments of
life.

One of the great obstacles of life – no matter how hard we try –
is that it is not always possible to find God in so many human
experiences.

One of the great obstacles to faith,
to believing, to accepting the love of God in Christ,
is that it is not always evident to you and me
how to find grace and redemption
in our toughest moments, days and years.

Are you like me, falling back on the compelling, seemingly easy answer
to think and feel that God is not present,
that the holy Spirit is absent and unaccounted for
in suffering and defeat.

However, my friends, if there is one iota of truth,
one lasting image, one pure lesson
in the tale of Joseph and his reconciliation with his
betrayers
(pardon me, his brothers!)
is that this example can lead us to a
different conclusion.

The theology of the story of these people's lives
invites us to consider that
– in spite of awful tragedies from which God
is seemingly absent or hardhearted or acquiescent
–
the promise of God's love is present even when we do not

see it.

The power of God's love redeems our suffering.

Martin Luther King, Jr., said, "Undeserved suffering is redemptive."

What others mean for evil God can turn into good.

We may get all wrapped up in whether God has a shadow side,

whether God allows for evil,

or whether God is acquiescent to "dirty deeds done dirt cheap." (ACDC)

God redeems evil.

By the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the Cross,

God overcame and conquered the power of evil

to rule or decide or dictate or set the course of our lives.

God redeems evil.

The love of God in Christ empowers us to turn a personal tragedy into a triumph.

Victor Frankl survived the Holocaust

and wrote a groundbreaking book called Man's Search for Meaning.

On the question of suffering, Victor Frankl said:

"Even the helpless victim of a hopeless situation,

facing a fate he cannot change,

may rise above himself,

may grow beyond himself,

and by doing so change himself.” (p. 147)

Making lemonade

Speaking personally as a victim of betrayal

from one whom I trusted and invited to serve by my side,
and then entrusted with those whom I care about deeply
– this significant congregation --

God seemed distant

yet in time I discerned that God was doing good through
it all.

Out of the pain and suffering

came a deeper understanding of Christ’s call to forgive.

Last year on Wednesday of Holy Week, while in personal prayer with
Christ,

I was able to forgive my former colleague,

and suddenly a heavy burden was lifted and cast off.

Out of the tragedy of lost friends and lost trust

I have emerged stronger, bearing the power to forgive.

Your pastor and this fellow Christian

has a deeper understanding of our spiritual journey,

human frailty and resilience,

and the strength required

to hold one’s head up in public and not be
ashamed of suffering.

God's presence has enabled me to grasp how hard this all is,

that timing is a part of the process of forgiveness,

as is openness, preparation, and prayer.

I would not wish my suffering on my worst enemy,

yet, thanks be to God, I am grateful for the resurrection of Christ

as one who has experienced a new birth and new meaning.

I died, and behold, I am alive again, by the grace
of God!

We boldly and faithfully dare to say:

be proud of your suffering.

Consider your suffering ennobling rather than degrading.

Do not be ashamed or embarrassed about your suffering

from bad deeds, bad deals, bad situations, bad times

and people who behave immorally and irresponsibly.

You are the victim, and God will redeem you and your life.

God is nigh, and God will see you through.

We can endure almost any amount of suffering if we know it has meaning.

Recognize the presence of the Living Christ in the midst of suffering.

Allow God into your life, and ask God to be the determinate of meaning in
your life.

Making lemonade

A little boy was admitted to the hospital to have his tonsils removed.

He was so nervous and frightened

that the operating doctor advised the child's parents

to not come hear him until afterward.

When they approached him after the operation,

they expected to find him upset and distressed.

To their amazement he was sitting up in bed,

eager and excited to tell them what had happened.

As they walked in the room he blurted out,

“God was there! I saw him and he talked to me!”

His mother said, *“Well, of course God was there, darling.*

But you did not see him and he did not speak to you.”

“He did, he did!” insisted the boy.

His father asked, *“Well, what did God look like?”*

“He was all dressed in green and I could only see his eyes.

He had a green dress and a green cap and a green thing over his mouth.”

“I see,” said his father, *“and how did you know that he was God?”*

At this point the child sat up even taller in the bed.

*“Well you see, Daddy, there were these three angels all around me
dressed in white and two of them were girl angels and one was a
man angel.*

The man angel asked me to open my mouth.

*He looked in and whatever he saw he called to the one in green,
and he said, ‘O God, come and look at these tonsils.’*

*So God came and looked in and said to me, ‘Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt
you.’*

So I wasn’t a bit afraid

because God was doing the job himself.”

Do not be afraid.

God is on the job,

the Holy Spirit is present,

and Jesus Christ is all in.

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!