
Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

University Hill Congregation

August 14, 2011

Matthew 15: 21-28

Psalm 133

Genesis 45: 1-15

First, those of you here who were also here during our pastor, Ed's, last couple of sermons might remember him being bewildered how, for many people in this liberal United Church, the scripture seems so distant, needing great interpretation, maybe even an apology, while he was finding just how very directly and clearly the scripture spoke. He was almost embarrassed to preach and say more about what seemed so clear.

Today's story of Joseph speaks that way. As always there were a number of texts that I could have chosen to preach from today, but as soon as I read this one, I knew. This is our text – our text – for us, today, in our situation, right here in the midst of our questions and anxieties and fears and ambiguities. Somehow God gave this story to us. Reformed theology says it a bit more carefully: the Holy Spirit takes the scriptural words and makes them The Word.

Yes, it is a story from millennia ago and, yes, you may have to sit with it a while, but it does not take a Biblical scholar or literary critic to have this remarkable tale just smack us on the side of the head.

Perhaps we hear it so clearly because, as Jesus said when people asked why the outcasts of his society were the ones listening to him, "those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." Those who most need Jesus, hear Jesus.

Perhaps we hear it so clearly because we need it so clearly.

A comfortable, self-sufficient and self-confident church hardly needs Jesus. A hurting, troubled church does.

If we are a hurting and troubled congregation worried about our friend and minister – if you recognize you live in a hurting and confusing, troubled world – if you are hurting and troubled yourself, somewhere deep inside, even in those places you try to hide away from yourself – you have come to the right place. You have come to the right story. You are being spoken to.

So... this is a rather amazing story that is the culmination of the long Joseph saga in the book of Genesis. Briefly, this is how the story goes:

Joseph is the youngest son of Jacob, also known as Israel, the twelfth son – which is where the twelve tribes of Israel came from.

He is his father's favorite and is, therefore spoiled: his father gets him a coat that, depending on your translation from Hebrew, either has long sleeves or is multi-coloured, or, if you are Andrew Lloyd Weber, is an "amazing Technicolor dreamcoat."

Joseph has dreams in which he sees himself in positions of authority over his brothers, who bow down to him, and he is young or naïve or self-absorbed enough to actually tell his brothers about his marvelous dreams. His brothers are not quite as thrilled as Joseph was, and when they get the opportunity they kidnap him and sell him as a slave to passing slave merchants. Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave, works his way up to a responsible job, is waylaid by the frisky wife of his boss, is imprisoned,

finally gets out after accurately interpreting the dream of the Pharaoh, becomes the number two ruler of Egypt, and establishes a food security program that not only helps keep the country alive through famine but centralizes much of the country's wealth in the hands of his boss, the Pharaoh. Not bad for a kid from the sticks.

Then the story slows down. Joseph's brothers arrive from far off seeking food. Joseph recognizes them, the ones who sold him off into slavery and likely death. How will he treat them? What will he do to them? Unrecognized by them, he first toys with them for a chapter or two. He then threatens their lives and, in particular, the new youngest son, the one he has never met, Benjamin. The oldest brother, Judah, offers his life in place of Benjamin: "please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

Then comes the remarkable culmination of an already remarkable story, the climax of this long saga. After all the rotten things his brothers have done to him, and after all the tricks Joseph has pulled on his brothers -- in the midst of this highly problematic and ambiguous history -- Joseph is finally able to proclaim, "do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.... God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God."

Where did God come from all of a sudden? One of the noticeable things about the story of Joseph in Genesis is the almost total absence of God. God is not even mentioned, certainly not in any significant way.

In the story of Abraham God calls directly to Abraham to pick up his home and move; God speaks to Abraham and Sarah that in their old age they are to have a child. God intervenes in the sacrifice of Isaac. Jacob wrestles with a strange man all night, probably God.

But in Joseph's story -- no God. Just a human family involved in family fights, then humans involved in a master and slave relationship, then as ruler and subject, judge and prisoner... then a very human and recognizable story of rags to riches... and at the end the possibility of a very human story of revenge, or, perhaps, something better.

Until now... right at the end, after a long and convoluted and very human story. Finally -- God.

And it is not a matter of God finally intervening and getting inserted into the story, waiting until the end to make everything all right, the *deus ex machina* of the theatre where the god swoops in by some machine at the end to rescue everyone from certain disaster.

No, Joseph says: despite the way it looks, despite all that all the human actors have done, rightly or wrongly, for good or for evil, this story is not really about them, right from the beginning. It is about God and what God has done for God's own, good purposes. God wasn't mentioned; God wasn't recognized... but it was all about God.

God sent me....

Three times Joseph says it, just to make sure it sinks in:

God sent me ahead of you...

God sent me ahead of you...

And then, in a clever literary twist, Joseph reverses the statement to drive the point home: not you, but God.

In a story that did not seem to involve God, God is the last word.

What a remarkable, unexpected vision of something unseen and unseeable: that God's purpose, though hidden until the end, was bigger even than human bumbling and sinfulness, that the history of God's dealing with us might be deeper and truer than even the troubles and problems and sufferings in which we find ourselves.

What an extraordinary unveiling of that which was hidden, that our lives, which we consider exactly that – *our* lives – might actually be the arena in which God is at work, working out the good purposes of God, taking our lives and making them into something much bigger and greater and more important than we ever could know or even imagine.

We think we have control of our lives... and, I guess, in some ways, we do. We make decisions; we love or don't love; we forgive or don't forgive; we turn to our neighbours in kindness or we turn away. In some ways I guess do control our lives.

But so did Joseph's brothers; that is certainly what it looked like. But somehow, somewhere in the mysterious heart of God, those actions and decision that seemed so very human and detached from any thought about God were actually the very work of God.

It is not that God uses humans as puppets, controlling our every move. It is that, despite our every move and in our every move and somehow deep at the heart of our every move, God's hidden purpose is at work: God sent me, not you, but God. God is far, far bigger than you and me, your decision or my decision.

We thought we were the centre of the story. We are reminded that we are not; we are not the story. God is the story.

It was because God is the story that Joseph was able to forgive his brothers. He was able to embrace them even though they had thrown him away not because he was such a good guy, not because he did the math and figured out he had come ahead in the end, not because he was enlightened, not because God told him to but because he recognized that this story of his life was not a story about him and his brothers but a story about the God that brings life out of famine, that One that provides, the One at work on good purposes even when the rest of us see only trouble and worry...

... the One who could take the cross of Friday and resurrect it into the new, fruitful, abundant life of Sunday...

... the One who, though often hidden, has something bigger, more life-fulfilling, more "godly", in mind than the illness, or anxiety, or worries, or weaknesses, or even sinfulness we know within and around us.

I think my favorite Biblical book is the book of Job; I read it about once a year. It is the story of a good, righteous man, who, for reasons completely unknown to him loses all he has: wealth, family, health. His friends come and argue with him: you must have done wrong to deserve this... a kind of karmic worldview, not totally unknown in some parts of our scripture, too. You are only reaping what you have sown.

But Job argues throughout the book that he is innocent. He hasn't done wrong; he has been righteous. So why is he suffering? Finally, at the end, God comes on the scene, chastises the friends, and then ignores Job's questions and just talks about the wonders and mysteries of God far beyond our human understanding. And then the book ends... and that is enough.

The answer to Job? In the end, God. God before, God above, God within, God ahead.

The apostle Paul says it better, although slightly differently, in his letter to the Romans:

“I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, 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.”

This is not a matter of simply throwing up our hands and doing nothing, taking no responsibility, just waiting around for God to come through. No.

This is a matter of resting confidently in the sure knowledge that even when life is threatening, even when darkness comes, we are caught up in the wonderful, mysterious, often hidden purposes of the One who will not let us go, not now, not ever... no, never.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.