

THE REUNION

Genesis 43:1-11; Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50; Luke 6:27-38

A sermon preached by the Reverend Theodore S. Atkinson
Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

History is replete with stories of reunions and reconciliations, people separated by natural disaster, by the passions of war, by anger and jealousy – and then they're reunited and reconciled. One of the oldest stories celebrates the reunion and reconciliation of alienated brothers. Joseph was the eleventh and favorite son of Jacob. Self centered and spoiled rotten, he dreamed of his brothers bowing down to him. His brothers grew to hate Joseph because of all the love and attention his father gave him. One day Joseph's brothers were out in the fields far from home. Here comes Joseph, their baby brother. They quickly hatched a plan to murder him. That's how much they hated Joseph. But the oldest brother, Reuben, wanted to save him - so he said, "Let's just throw him in this pit." Then a camel caravan came by and the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. They stripped off his coat of many colors, dipped it in blood, and took it home to their father. Jacob, his father, cried, "A wild animal has devoured him." Having lost his youngest son, he just wanted to die and refused to be comforted.

Twenty years passed. Through a series of remarkable adventures Joseph rose from slavery to become a prince in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He continued dreaming. He dreamed about a famine, urged Pharaoh to store food, and when the famine came Egypt feasted while the rest of the world came begging at the palace doorsteps. Eventually Joseph's brothers traveled from Palestine to Egypt for food. Joseph immediately recognized them but concealed his identity. He bullied them, interrogated them, accused them of spying, and threw them into prison. Joseph was understandably vengeful. But his heart softened. After three days he released all but Reuben. "Get out of here and don't come back without your youngest brother, Benjamin." Benjamin had been born after Joseph was betrayed.

The famine deepened. Jacob's family ran short of food again. He sent his sons back to Egypt. "We can't go without Benjamin," they said. Jacob reluctantly let Benjamin go. When the brothers arrived in Egypt, Joseph accused Benjamin of stealing and threatened to imprison him. His brothers begged him not to. "It will kill our father if anything happens to Benjamin." Joseph was deeply touched. He ordered the Egyptian servants

to leave the room. With tears streaming down his face he said, "Come closer to me. I'm your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt."

Now jump ahead 1500 years to the time of Jesus and our Gospel lesson. Jesus said, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you." Sometimes our worst enemies are family members as Joseph discovered. Sometimes it's difficult to love brothers or sisters or even our own children or parents because they've become our enemy or we have become theirs.

Laurens Van der Post tells the story of the reunion and reconciliation of two South African brothers in a powerful story, *The Seed and the Sower*. The older brother was tall, strong, handsome - an excellent athlete, a good student. The younger brother was a grotesque hunchback.. He'd never be an athlete or scholar; never be tall, strong, or handsome. But he had a great gift. He had a beautiful voice and loved to sing. He could sing like the angels.

The older brother was sent off to a boarding school where he excelled in athletics and scholastics. He became a popular student leader. Eventually the younger brother, the hunchback, joined his older, popular brother at the school. One day bullies on the playground surrounded the hunchback like hungry wolves attacking a straggler. They knocked him to his hands and knees laughing as he fell. They kicked him. They ripped his shirt from the neck to the shirt tail, exposing his grotesquely deformed back, mocking him obscenely. The younger brother looked up for help and saw his brother at a distance watching passively. Didn't come to help. Said not a word. His brother could have stopped the bullies but he didn't. He was ashamed of his deformed brother and he didn't want to risk losing his popularity.

The hunchback was never the same. He left school and returned home, bruised and beaten physically and emotionally. He became a recluse. And another thing: he stopped singing. The one talent in which he excelled, which gave him such great pleasure - he stopped singing. His brother eventually became a soldier in World War II, stationed for a while in Palestine. One night gazing up at the starry sky he remembered his brother. He began to realize what he'd done and was filled with remorse. Deeply ashamed, his heart told him he'd never have peace until he sought his brother's forgiveness. So he made the incredibly difficult wartime

journey from Palestine to South Africa, to his brother's home. He confessed his betrayal to his suspicious younger brother. They talked long into the night. Finally, the two brothers reached out in love to one another, embraced and wept hot tears. Something else happened that night. As the older brother was finally falling asleep, he heard the voice of his younger brother singing once again.

There's no greater human need than to love and be loved. Often within the Christian church as well as families there's an unashamed lack of Christian love which, tragically, turns many people away from Christ. Jesus said, "Love your enemies." The first step in loving our enemies is recognizing that we really have enemies. The second step in loving our enemies is to refrain from doing or saying anything unkind to the enemy. If my wife complains about something I've done, I look for some worse failing in her and complain back. Not good. There's no sin in being angry. The sin is to pretend it isn't there or to let it out whenever we feel it or to nurse anger in our relationships, feeding it more and more grievances.

Fred Buechner has said that of the traditional seven deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun. We withdraw to lick our wounds. We smack our lips over grievances long past. We savor to the last morsel both the pain somebody gave us and the pain we're giving back to them. We wallow in our pride and self-righteousness. And we justify it all on the basis of our principles. But when we refuse to forgive, we're left with more pain than we got in the first place. *When we do to others as we would have them do to us*, Lewis Smedes says, we cut a malignant tumor out of our life. *When we forgive*, we remove a cancerous growth that will end up killing us.

I remember how Saint Paul once said that we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ. Think of that! We'll all stand there - ministers with elders, deacons, congregation and their families. Our sons and daughters will stand there along with our brothers and sisters, our mothers and fathers. Our friends will stand there, and our worst enemies, right beside us. Those who hated us, cursed us, abused us will be there. Those we hated, cursed and abused. And the Risen Christ will be there. And before him - a table spread, a feast for all. And the Risen Christ will stretch out his arms and say, "Come closer to me. I'm your brother, ^{as Joseph did.} whom you sold for thirty pieces of silver. I'm your brother Jesus whom you betrayed and crucified. And now

do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, for God sent me to preserve your life. Come to the table! Eat and be full!"

Some may refuse to sit at the table. Some may say, "I can't sit there beside that man, that woman who cursed me, abused me." Some may refuse to sit at the table with their enemies. They'll go away hungry, weeping and gnashing their teeth justifying themselves.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it's not easy to love, to forgive, to turn the other cheek. Sometimes it's ^{even} hard to forgive God who raises our hopes to the heavens and then allows them to be dashed to smithereens. We may not forgive quickly or perfectly, but we take small baby steps in the direction of forgiveness that may, one day, become giant steps. The hate habit is hard to break. I know from personal experience. And like all our bad habits, we usually break the hate habit many times before we finally get rid of it altogether. But it's a habit I want to break.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? Love your enemies and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

Let us pray: O God, the Father of all, whose Son commanded us to love our enemies: Let them and us from prejudice to truth; deliver them and us from hatred, cruelty, and revenge; and in your good time enable us all to stand reconciled before the judgment seat of Christ. In his name we pray. Amen.