

The Reunion

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on February 19, 1995, the seventh Sunday after Epiphany. Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:3-11; Psalm 37:1-11; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38; Luke 6:27-38.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

History is replete with stories of reunions. Reunions- people separated by war, separated by natural disasters, separated by anger, ^{sometimes} separated for years - and then they're reunited. One of the greatest reunion stories of all time is the story of Joseph and his brothers. Do you remember the story?

Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob. ^{He} ~~Joseph~~ was Jacob's favorite son. He was spoiled rotten. He told his brothers that ^{he} saw them bowing down to him (in his dreams). His brother's were furious. They hated Joseph. One day Joseph's brothers were out in a field far away from home. They saw their baby brother coming. They ~~quickly hatched a plan to murder him. One of the brothers, Reuben, persuaded them~~ not to kill him. "Let's just throw him in this pit," he said. Just then a camel caravan came by and the brothers sold Joseph into slavery. They stripped off his coat, dipped it in blood, and took it home to their father. Jacob cried out, "A wild animal has devoured him." He mourned for Joseph and refused to be comforted.

Twenty years passed. Through a series of remarkable adventures ^{that you should read about in Genesis} Joseph rose from slavery to become a prince in Egypt, second only to Pharaoh. He predicted a famine. He urged Pharaoh to store up food. When the famine came Egypt had plenty of food. Joseph was responsible for the food supply. Eventually his brothers traveled from Palestine to Egypt for food. Joseph recognized them but they didn't recognize him. He concealed his identity. ^{He interrogated them about their family} He accused his brothers of being spies and threw them into prison. After three days he released all of them but Reuben. "Get out of

here" he warned. "Don't return without your youngest brother, Benjamin." Benjamin had been born after Joseph was betrayed by his brothers.

The famine continued. 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. This time Joseph accused them of stealing. He ^{threatened} to imprison Benjamin. 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!"

Could there be a better illustration of the words of Jesus? "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who ^{abuse} ~~mistreat~~ you." Sometimes our worst enemy is a member of our own family.

Sometimes our worst enemy is a brother or sister in Christ. *Sometimes we are the worst enemy of a family member. We are somebody's worst enemy.*

Lauren Van der Post tells the story of the reunion of two South African brothers. The older brother was tall, strong, handsome. He was an excellent athlete and a good student. The younger brother was a hunch back. He'd never be an athlete. He'd never be a scholar. But he had one great gift. He had a beautiful voice. He loved to sing. The older brother was sent off to a private school where he excelled in athletics and scholastics. He became a popular student leader. Eventually the younger brother joined his older brother at the boarding school. One day bullies surrounded him on the playground. They knocked him down. They beat him up. They ripped off his shirt. They pointed to his hunchback and mocked him. The older brother watched but did nothing. He could have stopped them but he didn't. The

26

P SALTER Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40
SECOND SCRIPTURE LESSON 1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Reader: This is the Word of the Lord.
Response: Thanks be to God.

HYMN 151 (Standing) "Crown Him with Many Crowns"
(AT THE 11:00 A.M. WORSHIP SERVICE CHILDREN MAY EXIT FOR CHILDREN'S CHURCH - Ages 3, 4, 5 and Kindergarten)

GOSPEL LESSON (Standing) Luke 6:27-38
Reader: This is the Word of the Lord.
Response: Thanks be to God.

SERMON "The Reunion"

APOSTLES' CREED (Standing - Hymnal, Page 14-Traditional)

ANTHEM (11:00) Choristers Choir
"Love One Another" - Sleeth (Luke 6:27-38)

JOYS AND CONCERNS
At this time we ask you to present requests of intercession, thanksgiving, etc. for example, "I ask your prayers for _____," or "I am thankful for _____."

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE
* The Mission Yearbook of Prayer for this week: Sudan, Zambia, Zimbabwe and Zaire.
* Our Sister Church - The Moscow Baptist Church of the Resurrection.
* Hopewell Presbyterian Church, Felton, PA, Randolph Bandy, Interim Pastor, "Pray for us as we select the Pastor Nominating Committee and as these people search for our new pastor."

THE LORD'S PRAYER (Hymnal, Page 16-Traditional)

TITHES AND OFFERINGS

Offerory (11:00)

Doxology (11:00-Standing)

Prayer of Dedication (In unison)
Loving God, bless our gifts so they will be used to make the world a place that welcomes the child, the childlike, and the child in us. In your image and with your strength we seek to do your will. Help us live the good news with peace in our hearts, reaching out to encourage the dispirited and hopeless with the love of Christ, in whose name we are bold to pray. Amen.

HYMN 244 (Standing) "Let Us with a Gladsome Mind"
BENEDICTION (Standing)

CHORAL RESPONSE

"Lord, Make Us Messengers of Peace" - Carnegie

THE PEACE (Standing)

Minister: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts. To this peace we were called as members of a single body. The peace of Christ be with you.
People: And also with you.
(The people may exchange signs of peace and reconciliation with one another.)

POSTLUDE

GREETERS this morning are Ken and Karen Charles and Don and Jo Drennen.

FLOWERS are given to the glory of God in loving memory of Adelaide and Paul Snyder by their daughter, Marion Ware.

WORSHIP ATTENDANCE - February 12, 1995
Early worship - 25 11:00 a.m. service - 143

SUNDAY SCHOOL - February 12, 1995 Offering: \$ 19.91
OPERATING OFFERING as of February 12, 1995:

Actual amount received: \$ 2,651.86

BUILDING FUND - Week of February 12, 1995 \$ 2,402.00

FOR COMMUNITY PRE-SCHOOL INFORMATION CALL FLORENCE BROWN (932-3359).

MONDAY

OFFICE CLOSED!!

WEDNESDAY 6:00-6:30 a.m.

Prayer for Renewal in Fellowship Hall.

10:45 a.m.

Serendipity Bible Study at Virginia Schlecht's home.

3:45 p.m.

Youth Choir Practices

7:30 p.m.

Chancel Choir Practice

7:00 p.m.

Bells of Praise

"IF YOU LOVE ME, FEED MY SHEEP" Please remember to bring your donations of non-perishable food and place them in the basket in the Fellowship Hall. This food will be collected and distributed to members of the community on an as-needed basis by the N. S. C.

PRAYER REQUEST BOX!! Please write your prayer requests down on a small sheet of paper and place in the box on the bottom shelf of the mailboxes. These prayer requests will be prayed for on Wednesday mornings at the 6:00 a.m. prayer meeting. All are welcome to attend.

WEEKLY LENTEN SERVICES will begin on Ash Wednesday, March 1, from 7:00-7:30 p.m. in Fellowship Hall. Different groups in the church will lead the service each week with Pastor Ted leading the first one on March 1.

hunchback was never the same again. He left school. He returned home. He became a recluse. He stopped singing. His brother became a soldier in World War II. He was stationed in Palestine. One night gazing up at the starry sky he remembered his brother. He realized what he'd done. He was deeply ashamed. His heart told him he'd never have peace until he went home and asked his brother for forgiveness. So he made the incredibly difficult wartime journey from Palestine to South Africa. He was reunited with his brother. They talked long into the night. He confessed how he'd betrayed him. They embraced one another. They cried together. But something else happened that night. As the older brother was falling asleep that night, he heard the voice of his younger brother singing once again.

My mom came from a family about the same size as Joseph's family. She was the ninth of ten children. One of her sisters was my aunt Addie. One of her brothers was my uncle Winty. Years ago, when I was still a little boy, something came in between uncle Winty and aunt Addie. The two of them came to hate one another. I don't know what it was. My mom knew but she never told me. When we visited aunt Addie her eyes flash with anger if uncle Winty was mentioned. And when we visited my uncle Winty the same thing happened when aunt Addie was mentioned. When aunt Addie's husband died, my mom called uncle Winty. She begged him to come to the funeral. He came. We wondered how they would greet one another after years of hostility. We soon found out. When they saw one another they embraced. After years of alienation, they embraced. It was a long embrace. And when they let go I could see tears - lots of tears - not tears of grief but tears of joy. From that time on, the two became reconciled as brother and sister.

But sometimes it's not so easy to forgive. I have another memory. When I was a little boy I remember ~~somebody knocking~~ ^{a knock} on the back door where we lived in Brookland Terrace near Prices' Corner. A man stood there - his face was weathered. His hands were calloused. He took his hat off when my mom opened the door. He tipped his head politely. He smiled nervously. I'd never seen him before but my mom recognized him. He asked to see my dad. Dad was in the dining room sitting at his desk writing out checks. Mom left the man on the back porch and came in to tell dad.

"Sam's here," she said. "He just wants to say hello."

Dad's whole body grew tense. He didn't look up. He didn't move from where he was sitting. He answered curtly, "Tell him I'm busy." His voice sounded mean.

"But he's not going to be in town long," she said.

"I don't want to see him. Tell him I'm busy," he said. I heard anger in dad's voice. I heard hatred.

"Please, Clarence!" mom said. "Just shake hands. Please!"

My dad was usually kind and gentle. He told corny jokes and laughed a lot. But he could also be a proud, bull-headed, stubborn man. He wouldn't back down when he knew he was right and somebody else was wrong. He refused to go out. My mother relayed the message to the man on the back porch. He left looking dejected. I don't know what the problem was. I can only guess the man had done or said something to dad or to my family and was sorry. That night dad didn't have much to say at the dinner table. He acted sad and depressed for days.

Someone has said that of the traditional Seven Deadly sins, anger is possibly the most fun (Buechner). We withdraw to lick our wounds - we smack our lips over

grievances long past - we savor to the last morsel both the pain we're given and the pain we're giving back - we wallow in our pride and self-righteousness - and we justify it all on the basis of our principles.

I think that's what dad had done. I don't know if dad ever forgave that man. I hope he did. When we refuse to forgive, we're left with more pain that we got in the first place. ^{But} When we do to others as we would have them do to us we cut a malignant tumor out of our life (Smedes). When we forgive we remove a cancerous growth that will end up killing us.

Jonathan Edwards is probably best known for his sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But he once preached a lesser known sermon entitled, "We shall all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ." At the last judgment, he said, we'll all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The minister will stand with the elders and deacons and all the congregation. Our sons and daughters will stand there. Our mother and father - our brothers and sisters - our friends and enemies will stand there. Those who hated us will stand there. Those who cursed us - those who abused us will be there. And those whom we've cursed and abused will be there. And the Risen Christ will be there - high and lifted up and seated upon his throne. Before him will be spread a sumptuous Thanksgiving table - turkey, beef, venison and ham - sweet potatoes and green beans - mashed potatoes, gravy, and corn. Corn bread and muffins. The finest wine, beer and ale will be provided. And there will be desert - pies and puddings. A feast for all the saints. And the Risen Christ will arise and stretch out his arms and say, "Come closer to me. I'm your brother, Jesus - your brother, whom you sold for thirty pieces of silver - your brother 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!"

And some will look around and say, "I can't sit there beside that brother - I remember how he cursed me." And another will say, "I'll never sit down with that sister. She abused me." Many will refuse to sit down at the table with Christ and their brothers and sisters. They'll go away hungry. They'll go away weeping and gnashing their teeth into eternal darkness.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, don't let this happen to you! I don't want it to happen to me. It's not easy to love and forgive and turn the other cheek. It's not easy to forgive those who abuse us. Don't believe anyone who says it easy. It's not easy, but we must. We may not forgive perfectly, but forgive, we must. We may not be able to forgive quickly, but we must at least begin. 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 (Smedes). But it's a habit we must break. We must begin now.

"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: Lead 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.