

Leacock Presbyterian Church, Paradise, PA
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Scripture Lessons: Genesis 45:1-15 and I John 3:18-24
January 8, 2023

MAKING IT REAL

Please listen thoughtfully with me to what Joseph says to his brothers when he reveals his identity and confronts them with their new reality. They had seen him as an obnoxious little brat stealing their father's favor from them. As their resentment grew, they came to hate him and one day acted upon their hatred. Though Genesis does not consider psychological factors as we would today, we can say safely that what Joseph suffered at their hands would result in severe trauma. They threw him into a pit and then debated whether to kill him or find some other way to get rid of him. Imagine yourself as a teenager down in that pit listening as your older brothers talk about killing you. Yes, Joseph is saved with Judah's intervention but only by being sold to a passing caravan of slave traders. From the Genesis view of God's unfolding purpose, that intervention saves the day and keeps the future open, but from a psychological perspective, such salvation is meager and the trauma continues.

When Joseph identifies himself to his long-lost brothers, he tells them this: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

The trauma is not God's doing. Evil is not God's way of working. Changing the outcome is God's work. In his brothers' hands, Joseph found only cruelty and slavery. In God's hands, Joseph finds life and purpose. Their deeds were evil. God brought good out of that evil, but it is wrong to tell a victim of abuse that God wanted the abuse to happen.

God has taken Joseph and his life away from his brothers' cruelty and control over him. God has rescued Joseph from their power. Even any regret they may feel over what they did to him does not matter for him now; it has no sway over him, no hold upon him; he does not need it. Notice, Joseph desires no revenge. Yes, what his brothers did to him was evil and intended for his destruction. No excuses are offered, and they still fear that once their father dies, Joseph will take revenge, but no. He instead calls upon his brothers to see and trust God's purpose of saving the people.

I have just finished reading a very insightful book titled *Trauma and Recovery*. That book,¹ examines the recovery process for people subjected to severe trauma, including combat veterans, Holocaust survivors, rape survivors, battered women, and victims of long-

term abuse in childhood. Today, Joseph would qualify. In a sermon, I want to address and must address what our lessons tell us about our God, and I want us to think about the need for making it real if we are to represent Jesus Christ to people, some of whom talk about him constantly, sometimes in very certain and authoritarian tones, while others, many others, have long since dismissed Christianity as irrelevant or even offensive and dangerous.

By “making it real,” I mean representing in our own humanity the gospel of Jesus Christ, representing him to people in ways that are honest, authentic, faithful, and decidedly respectful and humble. Making it real requires listening and not just for an opening we can exploit with our arguments. In biblical terms, to listen is to understand with sympathetic feeling, to walk with, to enter into the other person’s situation without trying to take control of it, to stand with the person and let ourselves become vulnerable. A church or a Christian that will not become vulnerable with people who are vulnerable cannot faithfully communicate the gospel. We do not share gospel when we have nothing to say beyond, “We know, and you don’t; we’re right and you’re wrong; we’re saved and you’re lost unless you submit to our authority, accept our truth our way, and become one of us.” That’s not gospel.

We have just celebrated Christmas. The Son of God came among us as one of us, in all our human vulnerability – coming not to be served or adored as a deity but to serve and give himself for all people estranged from God, estranged from each other and, truth be told, estranged from their own free and rightful selves. I am one of them. You are one of them. That’s not a good thing, our estrangement, and God did not do it to us, but our estrangement is a real human thing. Without being honest in our own humanity, we cannot represent what Jesus has done for us, cannot make it real for others or even for ourselves.

It is common in this era of forced positivity for people to say (or post) that you cannot change the past. So, just put the past behind you. Really? Just like that? By a decision of my own will? The people whose trauma is presented in that book I’ve now read cannot possibly just put it all behind them and move on. Hey, I’m from New Jersey, and “just put it behind you” translates into Jersey as *fuggetaboutit*. They can’t just forget about it. The horrors they have experienced invade their dreams, intrude into their relationships, and push out through the memories they have repressed for self-protection. The trauma has made them who they are. Recovery can redeem them from their past and set them on the way to becoming the persons they were created to be. God recovers Joseph, redeems him from his past, and gives his life purpose for the saving of his people.

I think about my past. Don’t you think about yours? Especially in retirement, I have time to look back on situations I might have handled better, people I have disappointed (including myself), and, also, wrongs people have done to me and damage I sustained. We have not all endured severe trauma, but in a very real sense, we are all in recovery. My past

needs redeeming so I can be gracious to myself as I become freer to keep becoming the person Christ calls me to be. As that recovery book points out, becoming that redeemed and liberated person includes changed ways of relating to other people. No one can go it alone. We need each other if we are to find and keep growing into our redeemed humanity. Like Joseph, we need also a sense of purpose that incorporates who we have been, what we have done, and what has been done to us, but in new and liberating ways that come from God.

Believing in Jesus is not a quick fix. Salvation is not magical: *Presto!* And a new person appears. No, but salvation is real, and we can join God's Spirit in making it real.

Once when I was boy and was sick, my mother read me John Bunyan's allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, and I liked it enough to read it again for myself and, later, to get an easy "A" on a paper I wrote about it. But Bunyan's book is an allegory which has a way of making truth seem far too easy. Christian, the main character, has been carrying a very heavy burden on his back, a burden we understand to be his guilt. When he comes to the cross, the burden drops from his back and he is free of it. Here is the simple truth: Jesus suffered and died for us, and his self-sacrifice frees us from our guilt and shame. But making that truth real for ourselves and then for others requires us to work through the process – a likely painful but also liberating process of recovery. Faith needs to build up the courage to look back honestly and go forward in hope, to be restored to becoming and keep becoming the people God created us to be and Jesus Christ calls us to become.

The First Letter of John tells us something remarkable: that even if our hearts condemn us, we can know that God is greater than our hearts. This biblical use of "heart" differs from our Valentine's Day understanding. The best translation I have seen for "heart" in this context is "conscience." Some people don't feel guilt where they should; others feel guilt and shame when, in truth, they had no control over what was done to them or, maybe, were just too young to deal better with life. My conscience makes me feel guilty where it has been trained to do so, but who trained it and how?

When a police officer was taking a teenage girl away from an abusive family, she said to him, "I'm a dirty girl." That's how her conscience had been trained. He pulled the car over and explained to her that she was not a dirty girl, that what had been done to her was not her fault but was beyond her control. Years later, she returned married and living with hope to thank him for helping her shake free from her terrible view of herself, from the grip of what had been done to her. He has recalled what he was able to help her do for herself as the best thing he ever did as a cop. God works in many ways. Thanks be to God! Amen.

1. Judith Lewis Herman, MD, *Trauma and Recovery*, Basic Books, 1992.