

## Sermon Epiphany 7 C 2022

Our family had our first Christmas here back in 1987. The mother of a friend of Judith's invited us all to Christmas dinner. I did not want to accept but fear of not abiding by US customs whatever they were, had forced me to say "thank you, yes we will be delighted to come." This family had 2 children, Judith's friend, another 5<sup>th</sup> grader and an older boy aged 14, the same age as our elder daughter. I quickly realized the mom wanted company for her daughter and we were probably the only ones to say "yes." Dinner was wonderful of course but the behavior of the son was horrible. Nothing was right; he disliked every dish and complained loudly and rudely. When about 6 desserts were on the table, he insisted on being given money to go to buy ice-cream. I remember the occasion after all these years and remember reflecting, "how was it that US men seemed charming and helpful and yet teenagers were so awful?" I ask this because it seems Joseph in the first reading would be in that category. Joseph was Jacob's 11<sup>th</sup> son and the son of his favorite wife Rachel. Rachel had died giving birth to son # 12 so Joseph was special. Jacob failed him by spoiling him, but Joseph was what I would call a brat. He loved being favored, used it against his brothers. He also was given powers to interpret dreams and he told his family of his dreams which said he would have power over them all. No wonder his brothers hated him. Well, at least they refrained from murdering him and instead sold him into slavery in Egypt. He must have hated them for that. During the first challenging years he was a house slave and then endured wrongful imprisonment. But he survived and became Pharaoh's chief commander, in control of the granary during the long famine. It was at this time that the meeting you heard took place. The needy brothers, suffering from a lack of food had come several times to Egypt for food. Joseph could have chosen to have them sent home hungry or could have found an excuse to have them all imprisoned. In fact, because he had recognized them, he had played a few tricks on them and got them worried. I'm sure he must have secretly laughed at their discomfort. But on this particular day, he revealed his identity to them and as you heard, he showed forgiveness and much love. He told them God had orchestrated the situation and they should not feel guilty. God had placed him in his role to help them and preserve their lives during the famine years. But it was only after he had kissed them and wept over them that they responded. Could you have been as forgiving if you had been Joseph? Joseph, as they could see, was not the spoiled kid they had known. As you heard, he was not just the second in command to Pharaoh, controlling food for the whole land of Egypt, he was also a forgiving man. There had been enmity between him and all of them and here he was showing forgiveness. Just imagine their feelings of amazement and then of shame and guilt. In the love Joseph demonstrated he removed all that enmity and wanted to remove their shame and guilt too. He had planned this of course and they were taken completely by surprise. Have you ever had to deal with a family situation where you could find a way to forgive which removed the guilt of a perpetrator? Or, maybe harder, has someone forgiven you in a wonderful way?

However, Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers does not seem the way our society goes about dealing with wrong doing does it? But as you heard from the Gospel today it was also the teaching of Jesus. He taught love does not hate; you must offer generosity to all and not just to those who will respond back. He told them, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Do note how positive his teaching is. There are no, "do not's..." This is why I think Jesus' commandments are harder because it is never a case of, "well if I don't do a, b, c then I am Ok. Jesus taught you always have to show love in the way you do the things you do." Have you tried? With Lent now only 10 days away maybe you can decide to try and live one of these commandments throughout Lent (and dare I suggest continuing

beyond Lent...) Yes, you can note he also taught do not judge others and thus you won't be judged, do not condemn others and thus you won't be condemned and that you must forgive in order to be forgiven yourself. This is all tough teaching.

I wondered about who I knew was living this way. Of course I could have said, "All of you," but realized only you can know that. Sometimes it is by dealing with an enemy and making them a friend that you know you are starting down the road of Gospel love. Abraham Lincoln is reputed to have said, "Do I not destroy my enemies when I make them my friends," But when I thought about lives showing love, I went to a resource I knew from the many years I have led Education for Ministry groups (EfM.) A book of encounters by scholars, you could call them theologians of their own religions tells us about the sharing of love between different peoples. One story is from a Christian professor in ethics and Latino studies. He had taken his students to a poverty-stricken area in Mexico, and they were in the home of a poor Roman Catholic woman. She had given them a few saltines with a little jam even though he was sure she could not afford to do so. They were invited to ask her about her faith, and he was the interpreter. Her faith seemed very illogical, superstitious and uninformed to his ears and he found himself trying to correct her statements. Then her 9-year son came in, dirty, undernourished, and barefooted. During school hours he had been selling Chiclets at the street corner. He gave her a handful – maybe 15 pesos – which she put in her pocket, at least all but one. She put the one in a box on the table. He asked what she would buy with that, but she responded, "Oh that, that's for the poor." He realized she knew more about the Gospel than ever he did with all his theological training. He had been the judge and she was the one showing love.

A completely different example came to me this week from Jim Wallis, a best-selling author who has written a lot about the political situation in the US from a religious view point. One is called "God's Politics, why the right gets it wrong, and the left does not get it." His article highlighted the intolerance and hatred many Americans have of Muslims. He gave a beautiful example showing a different perspective. Back in 2008, the Pastor of Heartsong Church in Cordova, Tennessee learned that the Memphis Islamic Center had bought land adjacent to his church. He could have led a protest against these plans but instead he put up a large sign that said, "Heartsong Church welcomes Memphis Islamic Center to the Neighborhood." The Muslim leaders were amazed. They had hoped that at best their arrival would be ignored but it never occurred to them they would be welcomed. During the time of construction of this Islamic Center the members were invited to use Heartsong church for prayer services. The regular BBQs which Heartsong members enjoyed started to include offering halal meat. The pastor met with the Muslim leaders to discuss how they might work together, and they agreed to work on feeding the homeless and tutor local children. The news of this reached a group of Muslims in Kashmir, through CNN. One of the community leaders said, "God spoke to us through this man. Another said, "How do we kill these people?" A third went to the local Christian church and proceeded to clean it, inside and out. The pastor of Heartsong said he was trying to show love to his neighbors, as Jesus taught, love and not hate. The residents in Kashmir sent the message, "We are now trying to be good neighbors too Tell your congregation we do not hate them we love them, and for the rest of our lives we are going to take care of that little church." Yes, Jesus teaching. When we can share such understanding of our need to love one another and not to hate, we can be larger and larger communities of love.

Here at Messiah, we have many opportunities to show that love Jesus commanded. Our Inreach committee under Susan's leadership shows love in many ways. You can certainly join the group; there is

a meeting for all interested people in coffee hour next week. Another wonderful way is to serve at the thrift shop. There we meet all the people who bring donations, who come to shop, who come to volunteer. If you have never considered offering even an hour of your time once a month, I invite you to do that. The love you show in how you welcome someone can make a huge difference in that person's life. I remind you of one of Jesus commands, "Do to others as you would have them do to you." Some of you bring in items to the shop – you expect another person to receive them, price them and display them and then sell them. That could be you for those who also come.

Today remember the way Joseph welcomed his brothers and all that Jesus taught us. Living his Gospel way of love can change your life today and every day. May God help you choose to do just that. Amen.