

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Jul 9th 2015

I've been told by my good Jesuit spiritual director that the story of Joseph is the first story in the Bible of human forgiveness. It is good to reflect on that story today in light of the Psalm and the Gospel lessons. Joseph forgives his brothers for selling him into slavery not because everything worked out well for him as a result of it, but because he sensed that it was all part of God's plan to use him to save lives. From my experience, it is easy to forgive someone for something he or she said or did to harm me if I was able to triumph over the wrong. It is not so easy if the wrong had a negative impact on my life. But if we look for God's plan in it all, we can see that it always works toward some good and we can forgive those who may have frustrated or wronged us. This is the case even if the pain occurs in the family setting. In fact, it is especially relevant if it occurs in the family setting. Over the years, I've come to realize that the family is actually the place where we most often have to forgive and forget constantly if we want to demonstrate God's truth in our lives. There are always tensions in families associated with petty jealousies, much like the ones that Joseph, his brothers and their mothers experienced.

What can we take from this story in light of the Psalm? The retelling of the Joseph story does not seem to be about forgiveness, but about recognizing that God sends some people ahead of others to set up structures of redemption and salvation for their own people. Joseph knew he was called to do that.

The Psalmist highlights that Joseph also suffered badly through this experience, but that his suffering was necessary to provide an opportunity for the word of the Lord to work truth through him. This is a powerful story that sets up the life of Joseph, a most beloved son, as a man sent before others for a saving purpose. This prepares us for the Jesus story. Jesus also suffered the humiliating experiences of being sold into bondage, all because of his claims to be God's favored Son. Then, like Joseph, Jesus suffers and is tortured until the word of the Lord proves him true. By his suffering, he saves our lives.

So how do the Gospel lessons for today speak those truths more directly to us? Jesus tells us that we are now all called to go ahead and proclaim saving works to demonstrate that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand. But first, we need to repent and believe in the Gospel. What could that possibly have to do with forgiveness? Here are my thoughts on this. While most of us who follow Jesus are not going to be sold into bondage or suffer persecution to prove God's truth, there must be some other way God provides for us to demonstrate that the Lord works truth through us. Jesus calls us to proclaim that the Kingdom of God is at hand in various ways. Sometimes we don't understand each other's interpretations of our callings. Sometimes we are even disrespectful of each other's callings. We need to repent if we bring suffering on others. And we also need to extend forgiveness to those who bring suffering to us. I think it is quite a bit like suffering persecution and being sold into bondage to be misunderstood and disrespected, especially when we think we are proclaiming the Gospel. Just as Joseph forgave his brothers and Jesus forgave his executioners and fickle followers, we must forgive others who do not understand our versions of serving in the Kingdom. That is quite a challenge, but if we can do that, we have probably got our calling right. If we can't forgive, we probably need to examine ourselves and our motives. We might need to repent of something. It happens all the time,

even in the best of families.

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