

August 16, 2020 Sermon notes - 11th Sunday after Pentecost

Genesis 45:1-15, Psalm 133, Romans 11:1-2a;29-32, Matthew 15:21-28

“Behold, how good and joyful a thing it is for brethren to live together in unity!”

Psalm 133:1 BCP translation

The first verse of the Psalm appointed for today utters the heart-cry of many people. We rejoice when a group of people work together for a common cause without undue strife and we yearn for that to happen in our own life. Sadly this state of unity does not just happen - it requires effort. The complicated story of Joseph and his brothers does end in a unity of sorts and for that we rejoice but the journey to that point was anything but joyful. Pitfalls and trials faced all of the relationships involved in that large family and much pain and sorrow was shared. When brethren live together in unity it is a cause for rejoicing but it takes cooperation and work for it to become a reality. In the story of Joseph, for instance, a view of a universe that was not governed by the philosophy ‘an eye for an eye’ had to be employed. Joseph had a good case for treating his brothers with cruelty and disdain instead of forgiveness and mercy. After he revealed himself to his brothers Joseph said, ‘But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance’ (Genesis 45:7). In order for the unity of the children of Jacob to come into being Joseph had to take a different view than his brothers had taken when they sold him into slavery. Joseph had been invited to regard his temporary affliction as part of God’s purposes for his entire family. Jacob’s brothers had to take some steps as well. Receiving an offering of forgiveness for someone requires a decision to accept or reject it. The brothers could have retained their animosity toward Joseph and refused his offer of forgiveness and lived with the consequences of that decision. One of the consequences of a decision to refuse the offer of forgiveness would have brought about the end to any unity among the brothers of Joseph. The acts of forgiveness and acceptance require the effort of all involved.

In their book “The Five Languages of Apology”, Drs. Mark Chapman and Jennifer Thomas describe the act of offering and receiving forgiveness and point out that 5 things are needed for a complete apology. They are: expressing regret, accepting responsibility, making restitution, genuinely repenting, requesting forgiveness. Each of these steps do not come naturally and so require effort. Some may be easier than others but they all require some effort on the part of the offender and the offended. The long and winding story of Joseph and his brothers describes such a journey in detail as an illustration that forgiveness is God’s desire for family dynamic. Indeed it is a ‘good and joyful thing’ when the efforts are made for people to live in unity. But that long and winding story also outlines how difficult that process can be. Joseph had to maintain a certain discipline in order to be seen to be

trustworthy enough to be given the position that enabled him to rescue his family. A level of forgiveness was extended in order for him to avoid the pit of despair. Faith in God's hand and God's ability to bring about the promise that was in Joseph's dreams was seen in the daily decision to maintain the connection with God. When his brothers appeared in Egypt he helped to create the atmosphere in which they would 'express regret, accept responsibility, make restitution, genuinely repent, and ask Joseph for forgiveness'. The unity of the family was restored and healing was allowed to begin. The remainder of the history of Jacob's descendants contains times when unity was preserved and times when unity was destroyed. God is always at the ready when His people are ready to do what is necessary to foster that unity.

The unity dreamed of is a unity that is ultimately offered to every human being. That the offer to participate in this movement of unity is extended to everyone is illustrated by the story of the Gentile woman who asked Jesus to heal her daughter. This story contained the hint that God was indeed interested in restoring the nation of Israel through the work of the Messiah but God was also interested in including the Gentiles in that same family. St. Paul would be called upon later in the story of God's people to help announce this portion of the Good News but here in the story from the Gospel we see the Messiah being the first to extend the ministry of God to people outside the circle of Judeans. As with all of God's dealings with humanity it was crucial for the woman to have faith - to believe God. This was demonstrated wonderfully by her use of an illustration that 'even the crumbs off the table would be enough to accomplish her daughter's healing'. We aren't told how the woman came to that level of faith but Jesus saw in her that 'faith the size of a grain of mustard seed' which moves mountains and he confirmed the validity of that faith by extending a healing hand into the world of the Gentiles and healed her daughter. A similar story is told of a Centurian who expressed a similar level of faith. The strength of God's healing love brings about a level of unity that is profound and is no respecter of human barriers. 'How good and joyful a thing it is for brothers and sisters to live together in unity'. The woman in the Gospel story withstood rejection by the disciples of Jesus and possible ridicule from her Gentile friends. The healing, which was extended through God's grace, did not take place without effort on her part. She was humble and faith-filled in her approach to Israel's Messiah and her daughter was healed. Unity of spirit requires effort but through that effort some amazing things take place.

St. Paul yearned for this unity to be manifested among his fellow Jews and in the portion of his letter to the Gentile believers in Rome he urged his readers to understand that God had not rejected God's people. The offer of God's kingdom and the unity that is made possible through that kingdom is just that, an offer. Forgiveness is an offer. Peace is an offer. Love is an offer. All offers may be accepted

or they may be rejected - that is part of what makes them an offer. The offer of God's peace and unity to the Jews of Paul's day was accepted by some and rejected by others but the offer was never withdrawn. After opening the door of heaven to all who 'confessed with their lips that Jesus Christ is Lord and believed in their hearts that God raised him from the dead' (Rom 10:9) the door was not closed. In order for the unity that God offered to come into being an acceptance of God's offer needed to be made. Sometimes that acceptance was extremely difficult while other times it appeared to be quite simple but each time it required the effort of an individual to receive. We too have a constant need to make an effort to receive God's blessing - to open our hands, our minds, our hearts and receive. In doing so the unity that is part of the gift of God will become manifest among us and it will be a 'good and joyful thing'.

In just a few more weeks our Eucharistic fast will come to an end and our gatherings of corporate worship will resume under some new protocols. We will once again be invited to 'take the holy sacrament to our comfort' and so we'll come out from the places where we are sitting (an effort), we'll take and eat the bread (an effort) and we'll "feed on him in our hearts through faith" (an effort) The grace that extends to us through God's gift is granted to us freely but in order to make use of that grace we must make some kind of effort. We make the effort of unity in response to the wonderful love of God that is offered to everyone regardless of race, status, gender, or creed. We make the effort of unity by 'respecting the dignity of every human being' and by 'continuing in the apostles' teaching, in the breaking of bread and the prayers'. We make the effort of unity by working at learning to have the same mind in us that was in Christ Jesus. (Phil 2:1-5) We make the effort of unity by offering and accepting forgiveness when we have offended or been offended. We make the effort of unity by praying for each other, supporting each other through the difficult times and rejoicing with each other in joyous times. It is my desire, and I hope it is your desire, that when people look at us they will say, 'how good and joyful a thing it is that those brothers and sisters live together in unity.' May we all do what we can to foster that spirit within us and among us.