

August 16, 2020
“Redemption With a Twist”

Genesis 45:1-15
Matthew 15:21-28

Jennifer my sister and I are eighteen months apart. I am older and shorter. She is younger and taller. This meant that for most of our childhood we were the same height and were often thought to be twins. This was further facilitated by our mother dressing us in matching clothes—two for the price of one—which annoyed us no end. Despite how like-heighted we were, as the older, I was expected to set the example, and Jennifer, tagging along behind me, always got away with far more than I ever seemed to. When she was about five years old, I actually carried her home from playing outside with her teeth embedded in the arm of a playmate. Mum had to bite Jen’s arm to get her to un-bite her friend’s arm. Rather unfairly, to my way of thinking, my mother immediately turned to me in fury...how had I let this happen?

Jen, of course, lived a charmed life. She applied herself at school, didn’t push our parent’s buttons nearly as much as I did, tracked into a solid career right out of college, married the right fellow first-time round, and ended up to be the perfect daughter. Her perfect life was a constant annoyance to me as I weathered storm after storm. There were times when I could have cheerfully thrown her into a pit. Strangely, however, no matter the idiotic stunts I pulled, Jennifer was always there to help pull me out. For some reason, Jen has faith in me, which really translates to the fact that she has faith in herself. And, being the good United Church-person she is, her persistent faith is also linked to a Christ-like response. The same kind of faith that Joseph was revealed to have when he encountered his brothers in Egypt after years of separation. And Joseph’s brothers actually did throw him into a pit.

If you were Joseph, and your older siblings in a fit of jealousy first plotted your death in a rather blood-thirsty way, then compromised by tossing you into a pit planning to leave you there

without food or water, but when a handy caravan of traders happened to pass by decide to haul you up again and sell you into slavery, what would you do? By the time older brother Reuben worked out it wasn't the best of plans and would certainly cause their father Jacob considerable pain it was too late. Joseph was gone and dead to them all. Somehow, the brothers learned to live with what they had done, despite the desperate grief it had caused Jacob. Indeed, life carried on until a famine struck and to save their very lives Jacob sends the brothers to Egypt to buy grain. Once there, their past transgressions meet face to face. The brothers are confronted with the horrible reality that their brother Joseph is not only alive, but has achieved success beyond belief in Pharaoh's court and is now positioned to be the answer to their salvation.

Joseph recognizes his brothers at once. Out of context and out of mind, the brothers fail to "see" him. Who would have thought Joseph could have survived, let alone thrive? As soon as Joseph reveals his identity, they are devastated. If Joseph chose to be vindictive, he held the power to determine whether they, their father, and everyone back home counting on them for survival would live or die. They expected death. Who wouldn't? They had shown no mercy to Joseph. They expected no mercy from him. But then the unexpected happened. Joseph breaks down and weeps before them. Here are his brothers, confirming that his father is alive. All these years he has clung faithfully to who he was despite the pain of betrayal, cruelty, hardship, loss, loneliness, and even imprisonment. Despite it all, Joseph has had faith in himself and suddenly he understands completely what it means to hold true to faith in his God. God, he cries out, brought Joseph and his brothers to a place of reconciliation...of salvation...of redemption. Redemption, as Joseph will demonstrate it, with a twist. Instead of revealing a heart blackened by hatred, Joseph is overwhelmed by unconditional love.

In the eyes of the world, Joseph would have been justified in punishing his brothers for

all they had done to him. Instead, Joseph chooses to create out of his life story a faith story. God has created an opportunity for salvation, and Joseph cannot bring himself to add to the harm already done. He finds himself in a position to be merciful and compassionate, to give thanks for every blessing—to be thankful that his brothers and sisters, his father, and all his kin are restored to him. Instead of punishment and death, Joseph opens his arms in welcome, and offers his brothers and family refuge; a safe place to make home, and food to tide them all through the years of famine to come. We can do likewise, if, without prejudice, we turn the heart of our faith towards actions that bring about reconciliation and restoration.

Without prejudice. Why is it that we humans so often twist things to champion ourselves and disadvantage others? Why do we hold ourselves back from seeking opportunities to reconcile and make new? Why do we so easily fall into tribalism, taking sides and believing we can set up roadblocks to preclude a freely given redemptive grace for all? I keep hoping for a brave new world. Why, when we are offered a taste of possibility of better, are we more likely to reject it and spit it out? Even Jesus is proven to fall short on this, as the Gospel story of his encounter with the Canaanite woman reveals. Even Jesus was capable of naming roadblocks with respect to his understanding of who was and who wasn't deserving of redemptive grace.

A Canaanite woman, indigenous to the region and despised by Jesus' people, approaches Jesus and cries out to him, "Heir to the House of David, have pity on me!" She asks Jesus to restore her daughter who is horribly out of mind to peace. Jesus ignores her. His disciples insist that he get rid of her. Finally, Jesus turns to her and you can read his disdain: "My mission is only to the lost sheep of the House of Israel." But Matthew has set Jesus up to be heir to an opportunity. He shows that Jesus has yet to fully understand what it is God is positioning him to become. The woman persists: "Help me, Rabbi!" His response reflects his mis-understanding.

He reverts to tribalism: “It isn’t right to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.”

Is Jesus actually saying: “I take care of my own, and you are nothing more than a dog to me.” In a neat twist of phrase, the woman replies: “True...but even the dogs get to eat the scraps that fall from the table.” With grace, she has opened Jesus’ eyes to see that the love and healing he believes God asks of him to bring about justice and peace is neither exclusive nor leaves anyone out. In a redemptive twist, the Canaanite woman transforms Jesus’ understanding of his mission and ministry. She has revealed faith in herself, in her identity, in the intrinsic value of her and her daughter’s place in God’s world. “Woman,” Jesus says, “you have great faith!”

We are in place and at a time that reveals great opportunity; an opportunity to overturn all prejudices and topple false dreams we are often taught to believe in that continue to cause harm and keep us separated from all that God loves. In our communities, our country, and around the world voices in protest are crying out “Help me...help us.” Here and everywhere too many human lives are left without, and too few have too much. Poverty, homelessness, subjugation, and tribalistic practices that limit the ability of millions of brothers and sisters equal access to healthcare, education, and basic nutrition, reveal a persistent mis-understanding of the place every human being on earth holds. At its core, this brokenness is a problem of faith.

The rise of movements such as Black Lives Matter and Idle No More reveal that privilege is colourized. War, ethnocide, discrimination and economic power mongering have resulted in myriads of displaced people wandering the world at risk and forced to take risks as they cling to life and dream of a safe place for themselves and their loved ones. Every day we see evidence of suffering and people left horribly out of place. In the face of such suffering and injustice, each of us is called to be graced with new understanding to enable a revisioning of every human life story as a faith story. Redemption with a twist!

With a twist, Joseph's life story uncovered profound Love at the heart of his faith. The grace with which he received his brothers revealed that a three-fold knot wrought out of Love, Mercy and Compassion creates the best out of every opportunity we may be confronted with. Even Jesus came to understand in his encounter with the Canaanite woman that it was not his place to discriminate where the opportunity for healing, reconciliation, restoration and salvation were concerned. Opening ourselves to radical Christ-like love empowers us to change our ways...to be transformed...to lead transformative change...to become the change. I trust and pray that each and all of us may be so transformed by Love that we have the faith to give and receive the grace that passes all understanding. It will make a world of difference. Amen.