

“From Start to Finish”

Mt. 15:10-20; Genesis 45:1-8a, 15

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August 20, 2023

Today we have two seemingly quite dissimilar stories. One, from Genesis, concerns how Joseph and his brothers, after such betrayal of the former and anxiety in the latter... coming together because the need for food due to a great famine in the land... would resolve their differences with a very happy reunion. The other, where Jesus addresses man-made ordinances concerning handwashing and eating food... which amounts to so much ‘sewer waste’... and how what is much more important than what goes in to the mouth is what comes out of it. But, despite the two very different story lines, there is yet a common conclusion: ‘it all works out in the *end*’...

OK, maybe that ‘off-color’ statement would be more appropriate for ‘jokes from the john.’ And I DON’T mean John’s *Gospel*. But it IS the truth that for both of these stories, there is a common thread: That for both, the important issue is not how they begin, but on how they ‘end’ up. They both involve situations or discussions that might be hard for us to understand. That for us to get the full gravity of each experience, we must look at it from ‘beginning to end.’ These two stories can not be fully appreciated until they’re considered “from start to finish.”

Now, when we last left Joseph, his brothers had just sold him as a slave to a group of traveling “Ishmaelites.” Which, while it would not rate very high on the ‘brotherly love’ scale, at least was better than the alternative of what many of his brothers wanted to do... to kill him! He definitely ‘felt the love’ from the ‘dissenting voices’ of brothers Reuben and Judah, who ‘saved’ him from that more ‘final’ fate. Even if he couldn’t understand why they did what they did...

As many of you know, those traveling mercenaries would wind up selling Joseph to Potiphar, a chief executive of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt. And in good capitalist style, Joseph would work his way up the ladder of success to become a trusted member of Pharaoh’s ‘staff.’ Ironically, his rise to power was in no small part due to the ‘Dreamer’ status that had so alienated his own family! The same family members who would come begging for help when their homeland was hit by famine. Which brought them to stand before the brother whom they had betrayed. Even though they didn’t recognize him at first, since he had changed a bit over the years. For whatever reason, they did not recognize their very own brother right in front of them.

It was only when this powerful man in Pharaoh's court dispatched everyone else away and said to them ***"I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"*** (Gen. 45:3) that they realized just who he was. The little brother that they had wanted to kill, and wound up selling him like so much grain or livestock. For Joseph's brothers, to borrow from the Greek, this was a real *'Oh skubala'* moment. ('skubala' meaning 'garbage,' 'refuse,' or animal 'dung.' You know, what comes out 'in the end').

ANYWAY, after this revelation of his identity, and inquiry as to his father's health, it would come as not great shock that ***"his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence."*** Other translations put it a little stronger: ***"stunned"*** or ***"terrified."*** And then Joseph says to them, ***"Come closer to me."*** If this were a Hollywood movie, you could hear the music dramatically increase in volume... da dum, da dum, da dum... If they were 'terrified' before...

And it is here that the 'script' gets turned on its ear. For any of those who might have experienced their own 'sibling rivalry,' and are rubbing their hands together in anticipation of the revenge that little brother was going to extract, they would be greatly disappointed. This 'dreamer turned demagogue' tells his cowering brothers ***"Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ... So it was not you who sent me here, but God."*** (Gen. 45:5. 8)

Instead of expressing anger and retribution toward his brothers, Joseph speaks words of compassion, of forgiveness... of wisdom. Rather than dwell on the betrayal he experienced at the hands of his siblings, Joseph comforts THEM! As he would later say to those same brothers as he neared death, Joseph believes that ***"What man intended for evil, God intended for good."*** (Gen 50:20) No matter what they did to him in the past, Joseph knows that God has been able to turn it around and use it for good. To borrow from Paul's words used centuries later, Joseph was a firm believer that ***"God works all things together for the good of those called according to his purposes."*** (Rom. 8:28)

In looking back at the course of his life to that point... through the good times and the bad... Joseph could see the hand of God at work in his life. That even as something as evil as wishing your very own flesh and blood to be dead could be used to God's glory. WE TOO must believe that OUR God can redeem ANY situation, no matter how dark it may seem. That whatever

'evil' may befall us at the hands of others, God can turn it to good. That God can in truth 'work all things together for us who are called to His purposes.' ...As long as we adhere to that statement from the gospel of Hobby Lobby: "I may not know what the future holds, but I know who holds the future. Our God is with us... **from start to finish.**

Which brings us to Jesus' words in Matthew's Gospel. As we consider Jesus' words here about that which comes INTO the mouth versus what comes OUT of ones mouth, one might gather that Jesus is addressing the biological food cycle in the human body. Bodily intake versus output...dietary habits 'from start to finish.'

BUT, of course, there is much more to this polemic of Jesus than consideration of 'stomachs' and 'sewers.' ONE, he is critical of religious leaders making one's daily practice of life as a God follower about MAN-MADE RULES than about GOD's. Today's lectionary passage beginning in v. 10 is a PERFECT example of why it is important to consider the CONTEXT of a particular reading. It is when we back up into verse 6 that we see the root of Jesus' concern about comes OUT of a person's heart rather than what goes IN to one's mouth.

When the Pharisees criticize Jesus' disciples for violating their human ordinances concerning the ceremonial cleansing of hands, Jesus responds ***"So, for the sake of your tradition, you make void the word of God. ⁷ You hypocrites! Isaiah prophesied rightly about you when he said: ⁸"This people honours me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me; ⁹in vain do they worship me, teaching human precepts as doctrines."***

That his why we must be very careful to not place even those valued traditions we have as Presbyterians over and above the foundational principles of Scripture. From the music we sing to the creeds we profess to the Bible translations we use, what is most important is that they support that three word profession of faith: "Jesus is Lord." Do they help us live out the 5 word synopsis of the Bible: "Love God, love one another"? In all that we do and say, are we following the will of God... or our own? Are we speaking His truths, or man's? From start to finish...

And TWO, with regards to daily practice of faith, does what comes OUT of our lives, from our heart, truly bear witness to what we take IN? As Jesus said in the 'Be-attitudes,' ***"By their fruits you shall know them."*** (Mt. 7:16) You can call a tree an apple tree all day long, but it is by the fruit it actually bears that you can KNOW it to be one. So is it with Christians.

We can spout off all day long as to how many church services we go to, or how many Bible studies we belong to, or how many community prayer services and humanitarian events we participate in. BUT the proof of our Christian faith is in our **words** and **actions**. Like one of my favorite sayings goes, "Sitting in a church or Bible study makes you a Christian about like standing in a garage makes you a CAR." Our church rolls ('r-o-l-l-s') are filled with those from whose hearts have come, in those words of Matthew, "***evil intentions, adultery, theft, false witness, slander.***" (Mt. 15:19) Which is why our church 'roles' ('r-o-l-E-s') need to be to draw others HEARTS back into a closer personal relationship with JESUS. "***Know Christ, Make Christ Known.***" Hearts, minds, and bodies that may well at one time have sat right next to you...

And in the same way that those who have learned in their minds what it means to be a Christian but don't practice it in their hearts, so too are there many people who have NOT ever set foot in a Christian church who act more like Christians than a lot of Christians do. And when you encounter someone like that, maybe a great compliment and invitation to them would be something like, 'Hey, I really appreciate the way you live your life in treating others. Would you like to come learn about the One who is the prototype of where your behavior originally came from? A guy named Jesus, who has promised never to leave you, never to abandon you... who is with you 'from start to finish'...'

Both Joseph and Jesus were all about PROVING that belief in God wasn't simply something we learned in our mind, but believed in our hearts and bore witness to by our lips and through our hands and feet. TRUE FORGIVENESS. TRUE FAITH. I came across a message by a Pastor Richard Rogers in Pleasanton CA that expressed some 'take-aways' that we can learn from Joseph's life in how to better believe how God, in Joseph's words, takes 'what man intends for evil and turns it to good.' Here's some of what he said:

1. We must **stay focused on God**: on the **word** of God, the **power** of God, the **love** of God and the **presence of God in every situation**.
2. We should **trust God** and not doubt His LOVE for us, **even when things do not go the way we think they should go**.
3. We must **never blame God** for the situation of **pain, sorrow, or grief** that we may endure due to **someone else's** actions or words towards us.

4. **Refuse to allow anger or revenge to gain a foothold in our heart**
5. **Always seek the presence and direction of God in every situation and He will make a way through the negative and painful situation to joy unspeakable and full of Glory.**

Joseph KNEW in his HEART... and Jesus PROVED in His LIFE... the truth of the term “Emmanuel”... GOD IS WITH US.’ In every situation. As we **trust in God**, even when things don’t go the way we think they should.... as we **seek God’s presence and direction**, keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... we too will KNOW that ‘God is with us.’ And as we consider all of the ups and downs of our lives, may we never blame God for someone else’s actions; knowing that **God will make a way** through every ‘negative and painful situation’ to **joy unspeakable and full of God’s glory**. Like the two stories we’ve considered today, may we know that our LIVES can not be fully appreciated until they’re considered “from start to finish.”

Other Scriptures relative to FORGIVENESS:

And **forgive us our debts**, AS WE have forgiven our debtors. And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one [evil]. For **if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; BUT if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”** (Mt. 6:12-15)

Then Peter came and said to him, ‘Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?’ ²² Jesus said to him, ‘Not seven times, but, I tell you, **seventy-seven** [or, ‘**70x7**’] times. ‘For this reason the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. ...[parable of unforgiving servant]... ³⁴ And in anger his lord handed him over to be tortured until he should pay his entire debt. ³⁵ So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother or sister^[e] from your heart.’ (Mt. 18:21-35)

Adulterous woman confronted by religious leaders, who said that she should be stoned, as per the law. Jesus began writing in the dirt. **“When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, ‘Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.’”** He then resumed writing. And they all left only Jesus and the woman. **“Jesus straightened up and said to her, ‘Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?’ ¹¹ She said, ‘No one, sir.’^[b] And Jesus said, ‘Neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.’”** (John 8:2-11)

Questions for Reflection: Why do you think Jesus resisted the Canaanite woman’s request? How does this fit with your idea of Jesus’ mercy and love? What changed his mind? How does this influence your faith in God?