

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany – Cycle C
24 February 2019 – Davidson College Presbyterian Church
Genesis 45:3-11, 15 • Psalm 37:1-11, 39-40
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50 • Luke 6:27-38*

Prayer for Illumination—Guide us, O God, by your Word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see light, in your truth find freedom, and in your will discover your peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Reaching Out into the Life of the World”

Grace to you and peace, from God our Creator and from Jesus Christ who reconciles the whole creation.

Joseph’s encounter with his brothers in Egypt and Luke’s version of the Sermon on the Plain both raise questions about how we are to live. In our time, they gain traction because we seem surrounded by discourses of fear and insecurity, all too often built on misrepresentation and deceit that dehumanizes the other and makes a mockery of who we claim to be in both church and nation. To be clear at the outset, in our tradition the texts confront us where we are. And in this month when the congregation has considered its mission involvement, we know that we cannot be the church (“the called out people of God”) or do mission (“the task of being sent out”) without embracing what the South African theologian David Bosch has referred to as the *missio dei*, or God’s mission.¹ This is a corrective, in a sense, for if mission is what we do, our activities are in order to the God who creates and sustains us, the One who is at work both in Genesis and in the Teaching on the Plain, even when the setting doesn’t let us see this activity.

You remember the story. Joseph’s father Jacob is something of a scoundrel, stealing his brother’s birthright, and wrestling with God or an angel until the dawn, when he is left with a limp and new name. And Joseph is Jacob’s favorite, the child of his father’s old age, who receives the coat of many. The commentators even say he was a bit spoiled, and after he dreams that both his brothers and the heavens would bow down to him, he is sold into slavery by his brothers. The dream itself is never interpreted, yet it comes to fruition. Joseph is sold to some passing traders and ends up in Egypt, rising to prominence in a foreign land as an advisor to Pharaoh, largely on the basis of his ability to interpret dreams—and to find solutions for managing food resources in a time of food scarcity.

When he encounters his family again, they have come asking for help in the face of famine. Joseph tricks the brothers into returning to Canaan to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, back to Egypt before he eventually reveals himself to them and directing them to

¹David Bosch, 1991, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 389-393.

move down there themselves to wait out the lean years of famine that lied ahead of them. Instead of choosing the path of vengeance, Joseph commits to caring for those who had wronged him during the five lean years that lay ahead. Although words like mercy and grace don't appear, Joseph himself speaks the important words: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Genesis 45.5).

It is an amazing story, but this not, especially on a weekend when the college has just hosted a seminar focused on how to read archives and what they say and don't say about slavery, to diminish the hard edges of history. In his interpretation, Walter Brueggemann insists the dream has come true, but he observes that the entire Joseph narrative is told in a tone where God doesn't appear in the way that is apparent in the rest of the Genesis story. Rather, perhaps we are dealing with a story belonging "to a generation of believers in a cultural climate where old modes of faith were embarrassing. The old idiom of faith had become unconvincing. . . . How does one speak about faith in a context where the older ways are found wanting?"² Brueggemann continues by noting that in the larger narrative, "the main point is that the ways of God are at work, regardless of human attitudes or actions."³

I think this is not, to discount the import of human action; rather, in the Reformed tradition, the focus turns over and over again to issues of God's providence or God's sovereignty. This isn't about control as much as it about an active presence in the life of the cosmos. Moreover, this coincides with anthropological perspective I try to share with the students with whom I work, a perspective that insists that no matter what our culture tells us we are not self-made. No we are made each other, for community, and a relationship with this creator God.

Of course, over the long haul, the time in Egypt doesn't end well, the Hebrew people end up in slavery, and this sets the theme for the Exodus, which shapes the rest of the first five book. Frequently called the teaching or the Torah, it is the story of how the community would organize its life in relation to the God who creates at the beginning of Genesis and chooses this people to be God's people. The key—and it bears much more theological reflection—is that this creating and sustaining God remains active in history, even in a family as twisted as this one. Brueggemann, however, situates the story—to which we are onlookers—as one that takes place between the poles of family and empire.

²Walter Brueggemann, 1990, *Genesis*, Interpretation: A Bible commentary for teaching and preaching, Atlanta: John Knox Press, 288.

³Bruggemann, *Genesis*, 289.

For our purposes today, the Joseph narrative raises questions about the nature of our response to God's mission in face of systems that are larger than ourselves. From where we sit this morning, these are also questions about our efforts to live together in the contemporary moment—both here and abroad. Over the past month, we have considered involvement in Tanzania and Nepal, as well as the Middle East, Kenya and Nicaragua, and if you examine the church's global mission page, you will see other connections as well. But Joseph's story is lived out in a context of power, and it is also worth noting that empires don't tend to last forever. Our engagement with God's mission forces us to ask some substantive questions about what it means to be great. These are poignant questions when we ask them in the context of a relationship with a selective liberal arts college in an increasing affluent segment of the county in which we live. What exactly is the role of the life of the mind as we seek to bring the resources that are ours to creative engagement with a world that is broken in so many ways and places?

This is a perpetual question, and in many ways, even as we think about reaching out, we might begin to answer it best from our own context. I've spent too many years working in Central America not to at least mention the issue of immigration. While we might have disagreements about the nature of comprehensive immigration reform, surely we can see the necessity for change in a system that separates families and for all intents and purposes puts many children in situations that make them even more vulnerable than when they left their home countries. Surely, we can ask about the push factors that drive people to leave their homes and take up residence elsewhere, just as Joseph's family did in leaving Canaan to escape a famine. Surely, we can insist that we recognize the pull factors of an economy that benefits from unskilled labor as part of the reason that these human beings come to our borders. And surely, from the depth of a tradition insisting that God's hand is active even when the winds of change buffet us from every side and the way forward is not as clear as it might be that there are no illegal humans in the kingdom of this creating deity who offers Joseph's family a new beginning.

Martin Luther King addressed the issue forcefully when he returned from participating in Ghana's independence ceremony in 1957. If I'm not mistaken, Ghana was the first sub-Saharan African country to get its independence. Passing through England on the way home, King noted silent the Church of England had been in the face of colonialist agendas in places like India. The words are applicable more broadly. Said King,

But something else came to my mind. God comes in the picture even when the Church won't take a stand. God has injected a principle in this universe. God has said that all men must respect the dignity and worth of all human personality, "And if you don't do that, I will take charge." It seems this morning that I can hear God speaking. I can hear Him speaking throughout the universe, saying, 'Be still, and know that I am God.' And if you don't stop, if

you don't straighten up, if you don't stop exploiting people, I'm going to rise up and break the backbone of your power.⁴

We can just sit with that a while, except that now we are forced to deal with the ethic from the Teaching on the Plain. How are we to teach, what are we to teach our children? As one commentator puts it, "And as you wish that people would do to you, do so to them" (Luke 6.31).⁵ There isn't enough time to go into it in detail, but in every case the teaching offers an alternative or a higher ethic, not based on any calculation of strict reciprocity but, if I'm reading the commentator correctly, of putting the life of the disciple community in line with this God who is both kind and merciful. Turn your cheek, lend with out expecting return, love your enemies. To follow Jesus is to enter into a relationship with this creating God whose love this Jesus teaches. That author goes so far as to say that "Christians act *on behalf of* the future of their enemies. Like the bearers of tradition and the evangelists, Jesus hopes that the new attitude will give the enemies the opportunity and ability themselves to step out of their enmity."⁶ It all rests, on the relationship with this God of compassion.

So it is helpful to remind ourselves of the trajectory of Luke and Acts, which originally are a single volume and tell the story from the birth of this Jesus, including a genealogy that reaches back into the Hebrew scriptures, until the church has spread from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria and to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8). Our guest artist from Nicaragua, Gerardo Arias, painted the mural in the congregation house, the one on the cover of your bulletin today, in 2014. I saw in a brief article written at the time that he was here that the name of the piece is "Energy and Solidarity: Spirit without Borders."⁷ The angels represent the Church or perhaps this congregation holding up the cross in the middle of the world. Solidarity is key, although I also like the word *convivencia* (living together) as we seek to find those place to act in solidarity with our sisters and brothers who are near at hand and far away. Gerardo comes from difficult times in Nicaragua and his a presence is a sign of both solidarity and *convivencia*.

⁴Martin Luther King, Jr. 2000. The birth of a new nation (Sermon Delivered at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 7 April 1957), 165-166. In *The papers of Martin Luther King, Jr. volume IV: Symbol of the movement, January 1957-December 1958*, ed. Clayborne Carson and Tenisha Armstrong, 165-166. Oakland: University of California Press.

⁵François Bovon, 2002, *Luke 1: A commentary on the Gospel of Luke 1.1-9.50*, ed. Helmut Koester and trans. Christine M. Thomas, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 239. The full section on this passage encompasses pages 230-245, including an interesting discussion of just war and disarmament (243-245).

⁶Bovon, *Luke 1*, 239.

⁷Angie Moses, 2014, Visiting painter at DCPC offers modern sacred art, Lake Norman Publications, 20 February. (URL is long, the article can be found with a quick internet search.) I placed the colon in the title, which is not in the article.

But the question remains—how are we to live? What ARE we to teach our children. In the Reformed tradition, the answer emanates from the liturgy—the symbolic and literal coming together before we are sent out—to the ends of the earth. I was fortunate in a couple of congregations I served to celebrate communion every Sunday in at least one service. We gathered around the table, the symbol of lives together and of the presence of the one who both calls us in and sends us on our way. In time, I found that most often we ended with a particular prayer. May it be ours to day as we think about how to live together (*convivii*), accompanying others who are our neighbors on their respective pathways of life:

“Gracious God, you have made us one with all your people in heaven and on earth. You have fed us with the bread of life, and renewed us for your service. Help us who have shared Christ’s body and received Christ’s cup, to be his faithful disciples so that our daily living may be part of the life of your kingdom, and our love be your love reaching out into the life of the world.
Amen.”⁸

⁸Slightly modified from the PCUSA’s *The Service for the Lord’s Day (Supplemental Liturgical Resource 1)*, published in 1984 by Westminster John Knox Press.