

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
February 20th, 2022
Luke 6: 17-26 and Gen. 45: 1-15

We were on our way to winning Thursday night. We were up 4 to 2 with about 12-13 minutes left in our indoor soccer game. Adult soccer is a place where old men pretend they are young, and it is an over 30 league, so some young men pretend they are old so they can feel fast. It is a strange space, but nonetheless, a space I have occupied with enjoyment for many years now. And the over 30 team I helped seed some seven or eight years ago has won the league numerous seasons. But one team has stacked their ranks and has won for the last couple of years. We have come close to upsetting them within a goal or two but usually, finish in second.

But on Thursday night, we had the game in our grip, we were commanding the pace, staying organized, defending well, and we were up 4 to 2. We were going to do it. And then it happened. The other team started fouling and body checking, and the refereeing was reliably poor, and it all got in Pablo's head. And on one play, Pablo came sliding in on a player, which is illegal in indoor soccer. He got blue carded. This means the team plays down a player for 2 minutes. But then Pablo got madder, upped the insolence, and got a yellow card, but he felt someone mocked him, insulted him, and the ref treated him poorly, dishonoring him further, and so Pablo upped the ante, making fists and threatened to punch the ref. As you can imagine, things went into chaos. Our team went into disarray, playing down a player for another 7 minutes of penalty in the game's final minutes, and we lost by one goal.

Many of the players on our team and I found Pablo's elevating of his own honor and pride above the team to be frustrating beyond measure and assessed the loss to his account. Pablo was offended and hurt. He is talking of not playing any more, not because of his actions, but because of our lack of action. You see, he was hurt and angry that the team did not arise to his defense to defend his dignity and honor. We stood passively by when he felt insulted and mocked.

As I've pondered Thursday night's events, it has made me read our gospel passage more carefully. Jesus' listeners were reared in an honor/shame culture. They knew that you do not let someone take away the honor or dignity of oneself or a family member without retaliating, opposing, defending, or saving face in some way. Pablo probably has a fair bit in common with Jesus' crowd. But I suppose we do as well if we consider every moment we are willing to react, or get back at, or go to war over injury or offense.

Reflecting on these things, Jesus' words make more sense. And it also makes more dramatic the cultural shift Jesus is inviting us towards.

"I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return."

Pablo was overtaken, blew the whole moment up, and we lost our rhythm and composure. It makes me wonder how often we have reacted out of our hurt, or an offense, or our pain, or feeling threatened or dishonored. It makes me wonder how much our pain and traumas have determined and directed our responses and our actions. How often do we all get overtaken in a moment? How often are we triggered by pride, insecurity, or trauma?

Our Genesis reading is about Joseph who too is being triggered by the past pain and the figures who have shown him hate and violence and disrespect and dishonor. Our reading features the reunion, but it harkens back to earlier chapters, and earlier time when his brothers were willing to do away with Joseph. Joseph was young at the time but had dreams and visions of being the greatest and dreams where his older brothers would be bowing down to him. So, his older brothers did away with the dreamer to maintain their own dignity and honor and places within the pecking order.

It has been many years at the time of chapter forty-five. It is a time when normal rhythms are disrupted by crisis. Instead of a pandemic, it was a worldwide famine. Gen 41:54 says, "There was famine in every country, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread." Jacob and his clan can't grow or find food. So, he sends his sons in search of provisions down to Egypt, the ancient bread-basket of the world, to buy grain, where the Nile's flood plains still produce food. And as they go down to Egypt to buy grain, alienated brothers are brought back into the same space.

Chapter 42 reads, "now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold [grain] to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground." They bow to show deference, and Joseph is taken off guard. "When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. ... Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!"

Joseph was doing his work when these faces appeared before him, when they accost him as out of nowhere. He has built a life, developed new rhythms, connections, vocation. And boom, the past gets reinjured, triggered, reified. He reacts with a bit of shock, and he treats them harshly rather than as brothers. They were the ones who grabbed him violently by the arms and thrust him into the pit, who cold-heartedly sold him off unconcerned of what would happen to him, who treated him the way an enemy would.

There stands before him the people who were willing to crush his humanity, to cast him from the family, and throw him to the wolves. Human history is full of cruel acts. Those in power have oft ripped apart the lives of others. Like a dysfunctional family, humanity has a long checkered history of terror, abuse, inequity, injustice, and its own ways of keeping the family secrets from being fully identified and addressed.

But like living in a family that won't acknowledge its dysfunction, you live in it and are triggered by it. And it is hard to heal when the pain keeps getting reactivated or if the power balances haven't shifted, and the story has not been rewritten in some way.

When Joseph's brothers appear before him, his first impulse is to accuse his brothers of spying. He invents a charge. And throws them in prison for three days. Joseph releases them on conditions. He wants them to bring back his youngest brother, Benjamin, with whom he shared a mother. In all this, he overhears *their* distraught state (for they did not realize Joseph spoke their language), their anguish, as they rehash how this all must be punishment by God for selling their brother off even when he pleaded with them not to do it. Joseph overhears this.

And when Joseph sends them back home, he retains Simeon. He has Simeon bound while the other brothers look on. The brothers, minus Simeon, go home and get Benjamin. When they return, Joseph sets them up again, planting money and a

golden cup in their bags of grain, like a dirty cop planting contraband on a suspect, justifying whatever he chose to do with them. They are in Joseph's hands.

Stories often work on reversals. And the full reversal has happened. It is the kind of reversal you may have dreamt about in your anger and powerlessness over those who have hurt or wronged you. Joseph was once the powerless one, pleading for mercy. Now he is the one in power, second only to Pharaoh in all of Egypt.

The brothers have no recourse to speak of. They are now firmly in Joseph's power, realizing what they did to others, and they plead for their own lives. This is a poignant detail given the history. They plead for their younger brothers, Benjamin and Simeon, before the brother they sold off. They plead for their brothers before the brother whose pleas they would not listen to back there in the homeland. And the father whose heart they were willing to break when they sold Joseph off, now puts the burden of his very life on his sons' ability to preserve his other sons, Simeon and Benjamin. He cannot lose more children.

Four chapters. Joseph is in power. Control. He now possesses the ability to hurt, pay back, threaten, and inflict the anguish that he felt for many years. Retribution. Isn't that our standard of justice so often? They are going to get what they deserve. But as our reading picks up in chapter forty-five, Joseph cannot keep it up any longer. Something overcomes him and keeps him from going down the road of power, revenge, reciprocation, and retribution. He lets the pain wash over him, crying like a baby. He cries so loud that the other Egyptians on the other side of the door wonder what the bejeebers is going on in there.

"Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

I think of our poem and this moment when the power of the past and the pain is diminished and reconfigured. The pain is lessened. Time helps. A change in power dynamic makes something new possible, as does the diminishment of a figure who once intimidated.

But finally there came the night
when I rose out of my sheets
and stumbled down the hall.

The door fell open

and I knew I was saved
and could bear him,
pathetic and hollow,
with even the least of his dreams
frozen inside him,
and the meanness gone.

A lot has to transpire to arrive at such a moment. The power the person has over you has to shift somehow. Time. Humanity has to take its toll, weakening and softening with age the cruel power until we can see differently and relate differently.

and looked into his blank eyes
in which at last
I saw what a child must love,
I saw what love might have done
had we loved in time.

I wonder if that is something like what Joseph came to see in his brothers. It did not come easy, I do not doubt. After all, for four chapters of the story, Joseph witnesses his brothers plead for Benjamin, for their own lives, and for their father's heart. What a contrast when they so easily sold him off. But despite the triggering and reinjuring all these years later, he relinquishes his power over them and chooses forgiveness and love. He cannot keep up the alienation any longer. He cannot maintain his anger.

There comes a point for Joseph that the tiger has been defanged. They cannot hurt him, at least not to the same degree as they could in the past. He sees them, much like Mary Oliver does her father in the poem, with pity and sadness for what could have been, but with love.

Now if we circle back to Luke six, we hear a shift. We are called to no longer maintain our honor, to seek retribution and to punish, but to find a new way. Because the cruel reality is that we so often become the monster we decry. Joseph was tempted to become that monster, to do to his brothers as they had done to him. Maybe the art is not to punch back, but to take the power out of the other's punch. Maybe it is to find healing and wholeness apart from pride and retribution.

Now, this in no way justifies the oppressing or abusing of others. We would not say to one in a power-down situation to suffer the abuses that come at them, keep taking it, and keep being oppressed. In fact, we, like Pablo, might want others to come to our aid and defense and speak up for us. I'm sure Joseph would have liked one of his brothers to advocate for him. Yes, the biblical call to justice is to advocate for the powerless and intervene for the vulnerable.

And yet, the higher calling of the sermon on the plain is to not let these traumas determine and direct our reactions and the ongoing narrative. Take a domino out of the cascading motion and see what happens. Don't throw the punch back. Don't cut off the love and kindness just because it was not shown to you first. You have heard it said, to hate your enemies. But I say to you, love your enemies. Pray for those that persecute you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."

That is a high calling. But if we are not to be continually taken over by our triggers, taken over by past pain and trauma, taken over by the patterns of pride and arrogance and insecurity, taken over by the patterns accepted in the world, then we might risk it. What do you think?

And all God's people said...