

No Regrets: mercy and reconciliation

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

I was talking to a friend of mine last week and she was saying the one good thing about the corporate boxing match we call 'work' is that every time you get knocked down, you learn something about how to get up again.

You've heard me tell stories about the rough start I had in Australia and you've also heard me say, I wouldn't go back and change any of it.

Our Joseph of many colours would say the same. His whole life was designed for him to be exactly where he was, when he was, in order to save his country and his family from starvation. Joseph probably did not see his generosity as an act of mercy but rather as God's plan. He was simply overwhelmed by being with the family that he loved once again. What he offered was something beyond forgiveness.

What if he had stayed a shepherd, dreaming a future under a tree?

You've heard me say it before and I will probably say it many more times. Forgiveness is not 'forgetting' what happened. It is not 'letting go' of some injustice – although that is part of the process. It is not tolerating or ignoring or some grand gesture that is meant to be demeaning and at the same time make you look more righteous. That is just self-serving. Forgiveness is beyond all that – it is in the joy and love Joseph had for his family. It is freeing and its in love. THAT is the kind of love God gives us – and we find so hard to give to others.

It is like the parable of the precious stone¹.

A wise woman who was travelling in the mountains found a precious stone in a stream. The next day she met another traveller who was hungry, and the wise

¹ Of which there are many versions dating back to the desert fathers. A holy and happy hermit came to the outskirts of a village and settled down under a tree for the night. He got out his Bible and was about to say his prayers, which he always prayed in Jesus' name, when a villager suddenly came running up to him and exclaimed, "The stone! The stone! Give me the precious stone!"

"What stone?" asked the hermit.

"Last night an angel appeared to me in a dream," explained the villager, "and he told me that if I went to the outskirts of the village at dusk I'd find a hermit who would give me a precious stone that would make me rich forever."

The hermit rummaged in his bag and pulled out a stone. "Is this the stone that you're looking for?" he asked. "I found it on a forest path some days ago. You can have it."

The man gazed at the stone in wonder. It was a diamond as large as a person's fist! It was probably the largest diamond in the whole world! He grabbed it and hurried home, holding the treasure close to his heart.

That night the villager clutched his precious stone as he went to bed, but all night he tossed about, unable to sleep. He kept thinking about the diamond and the hermit.

Before dawn he jumped out of bed and ran back to the hermit. He found him sleeping peacefully under the tree. He shook him awake, crying out, "I don't want the diamond! I don't want the diamond! Here, take it back. Instead, teach me how to pray so I can have the kind of riches that makes it possible for you to give this diamond away so freely."

woman opened her bag to share her food. The hungry traveller saw the precious stone and asked the woman to give it to him. She did so without hesitation. The traveller left, rejoicing in his good fortune. He knew the stone was worth enough to give him security for a lifetime. But a few days later he came back to return the stone to the wise woman.

“I’ve been thinking,” he said. “I know how valuable the stone is, but I give it back in the hope that you can give me something even more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me something more precious. Give me what you have within you that enabled you to give me the stone.”

There is something beyond “forgiveness” – beyond mercy – although, in a way, they are necessary steps.

Sometimes, we just need the wisdom to see it from a distance. “It is difficult for modern people just as it was for ancient people to believe God is at work even in life’s dark and destructive moments. One of the great obstacles to faith is that, no matter how hard one tries, it’s simply not possible to identify grace or redemption in so many human experiences.”² In other words, when you’re in the muck – you can’t believe God is in there too. It is easier to say that God is NEVER present in human suffering or defeat but Joseph is a metaphor of what God can do with human life – turn a curse into a blessing. Joseph is a metaphor for God who has every reason to reject his wicked family but instead loves them.

We can’t live in a spiritual world that erases what made us who we are –even those who cursed us, shaped us. Not only did Jacob get a limp that reminded him of God every day, he also carried the blessing that was given.

What Jesus said to the Canaanite woman was offensive. It was unapologetically racist. Remember that Rabbinical laws said Jews could not meet, eat or touch non-Jews lest they be deemed unclean. The Rabbi Jesus was preaching to Jews and he saw his mission FOR Jews. He even instructed his disciples along those lines.³

The Canaanites were the indigenous people of the land. Pushed to the edge by the invading Israelites. Deemed dirty and unworthy and forgotten though their lands and livelihoods were stolen. After such a defeat, you’d think that would just ask to be left alone but no doubt they cried for justice and peace. Just as our first peoples do. But the Israelites said NO.

² Texts for preaching: Year A, Brueggemann, Cousar et al, p. 445

³ There are several words in Hebrew and Yiddish for non-Jew or gentile and most of them are pejorative. Goy can be used in a derogatory manner. The Yiddish lexicographer Leo Rosten in *The New Joys of Yiddish* defines goy as someone who is non-Jewish or someone who is dull, insensitive, or heartless.

The woman had every right to take offense but instead, she comes back with a witty response that shows she will not be deflected from her mission. “She becomes the model voice from beyond the boundaries who stakes her claim on the mercy and generosity of God.”⁴ Jesus has people all over his travels providing food and a bed for Him. Gracious generosity, freely given. Is there salvation for the Canaanite’s woman’s daughter? Can we save the next generation?⁵

In this story, there is a resounding YES! The tables are turned. We see the woman is ministering to Jesus by alerting him to the hypocrisy of limiting God’s generosity and mercy. By ministering to her, he crossed a boundary and she grasped that one thing his Jewish followers still could not understand...that the good news belongs also to outsiders. That God’s people are ALL people. Can the white followers of Jesus hear their cry?

Yes, there are things in my life I might have done differently but every step, and every misstep, is what led me to right here, in this community. The hardest ask beyond forgiving someone else, is to turn God’s mercy and forgiveness to those who cry out even if we don’t believe they deserve it and to turn that forgiveness upon ourselves. Amen

⁴ Texts for preaching: Year A, Brueggemann, Cousar et al, p. 450

⁵ Inspired by a fabulous sermon written by Apelu Tielu for the Canberra Presbytery Meeting 19 Aug 2023