

"Bad Becoming Good"

Genesis 50:15-21

September 14, 2014

14th Sunday After Pentecost

We know how life goes: whatever is good will become bad and whatever is bad will become worse. For example, a piece of fresh fruit left on the counter is good. But it will eventually become bad and spoil. After it spoils, it becomes rotten. A new car is nice with the new car smell. After awhile, it becomes a plain old car. Eventually, it will become a junker that will be sold for scrap. Even our bodies are this way. We are “fearfully and wonderfully made” says the psalmist. Yet our bodies become old and break down. Eventually we die. Good becomes bad and bad becomes worse. It’s never the other way around....except in our text for today.

Imagine the situation of Joseph’s brothers. They had hated Joseph when he was a kid and had sold him into slavery. The brothers had a tough life and had suffered through a world wide famine. When they came to Egypt for food and encountered Joseph on the throne (even though they did not recognize him), they were accused of being spies and thieves by Joseph as a test of their character. After moving to Egypt with their father, Jacob, and their families, they enjoyed a relatively good existence, partially because dad was there to keep all of his sons, even the powerful Joseph, in line.

But now we read in our text that Jacob had died. The brothers’ carefree existence was about to be shattered, they thought. What had been good was about to become bad and even worse. They said to themselves, “It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil we did to him.” Joseph could have them killed or, at least, tortured or sold them as slaves now that father Jacob was not there to protect them. And no one would have blamed Joseph for exacting that revenge.

Joseph had had a pretty good life in the beginning. He was his father’s favorite son. His father had given him a coat of many colors to show his favor. But then what was very good went very bad. When he came to his brothers, they hated him, rejected him, and sold him into slavery.

When he arrived in Egypt, he became the trusted slave of a powerful man named Potiphar. What was bad got worse when Joseph was thrown into prison on a false charge of rape by Potiphar's wife who had been spurned by Joseph when she attempted to seduce him.

While in prison, he became the jailer's right hand man and even interpreted the troubling dreams of Pharaoh's cook and butler. His hopes were raised when the butler promised to remember Joseph when he got out of prison. But what was worse became "worse-er" when he was forgotten and left to rot in prison.

Joseph caught a break when Pharaoh needed someone to interpret his troubling dreams and the butler finally remembered him. In gratefulness for correctly interpreting his dreams about the coming seven years of plenty and the subsequent seven years of famine, Pharaoh made Joseph the most powerful man in all of Egypt, second only to him. .

Now was Joseph's chance. After decades of suffering, pain, and rejection and after years of good becoming bad and bad becoming worse, Joseph could squash his brothers who had set this whole process into motion. He could have whatever revenge he chose to get back at them.

Knowing this, the brothers sent him a message in which they claimed that, before he died, Jacob, told them to tell Joseph to forgive them for the evil they had done to him. They came into his presence, threw themselves down before them, and offered to be his slaves.

Joseph did something very strange and unexpected. He bypassed the revenge to which he was entitled. He refused to "play God". He chose to see his suffering, pain, and rejection in a different light. He says, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." Joseph acknowledges the evil intent of their evil actions. But he sees a different purpose and intent for their actions by God. God used this evil for good – to eventually save thousands upon thousands of people from a terrible famine. So Joseph forgave his brothers, promised to care for them and their families, and comforted them with his words.

This is not a fluke occurrence or a lucky break only for Joseph. This is how God works. While the world uses good things intentionally to bring about bad outcomes, God uses bad things intentionally to bring about good outcomes. This is how He deals with us.

We are like Joseph's brothers. We all start off bad – conceived in sin and born in iniquity – and things just get worse. We face daily desires and temptations – some from the devil, many from the sinful world around us and most (I would say) from our own sinful flesh. These temptations bring forth all sorts of sins. Sins bring forth guilt and ultimately result in death and hell. James compares it with some sort of perverse cycle of life. He writes, "But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death." (James 1:14-15)

Jesus is the greater Joseph. He enjoys the favor of His Father in heaven. He is adorned with holiness, clothing finer than a coat of many colors. Yet when He came among us, His brothers, he was "despised and rejected", as the prophet said. He was sold by a friend to His enemies for 30 pieces of silver.

Things were bad and they became worse – far worse than even Joseph experienced. He was tortured, flogged, and beaten. He was condemned to death by corrupt humanity and nailed to a cross. And on that cross, He was abandoned by His Father. He died with the sin of the world on His back and under the wrath of God.

Like Joseph who came from the depth of prison to become ruler in Egypt, Jesus came from the depth of the grave to become the living Lord with all authority in heaven and on earth given to Him. Now was His chance! Like Joseph, He had suffered greatly and unjustly at the hands of humanity. He had endured it all and come through it successfully. Now, if He chose to, as the resurrected Lord of all, Jesus could have squashed us. He could have taken revenge against us since it was us and our sin which was responsible for all of His suffering. He would have been perfectly justified in doing so.

But, like Joseph, Jesus chose not to. His life of being despised and rejected, as well as His suffering and death were all bad things. There is no way to deny it or pretty it up. These things were inflicted upon Him by the Jewish leaders, the Roman soldiers, Peter, Judas, the disciples, the people of Israel, and ultimately us who share in their sin. Their intent, as well as ours, is evil. We reject God and the One whom He sent because of our sin. We deserve whatever punishment or vengeance He would inflict upon us.

But Jesus chooses to see this whole thing in a different way. Paraphrasing Joseph's words, Jesus says to us, "Do not fear...you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring about the salvation of all people." The evil of Jesus being despised and rejected, suffering and abandoned, nailed to a cross and dying was all used by God for good to bring about the salvation of all people. By placing our sin upon Jesus, God is able to remove it from us. By inflicting His wrath for our sin upon Jesus, God is able to spare us that wrath and punishment. By abandoning Jesus on the cross, God never has to abandon us in hell.

Like Joseph (only on a far greater scale), Jesus chooses to show mercy to us and forgive us. He comes back from the dead to proclaim this forgiveness and then grants that authority to forgive sins to His apostles and those who serve after them. He continues to provide for us – feeding us with His body and blood in His supper. He comforts us and speaks kindly to us when we are sad, guilty, or afraid. The evil He suffered would not indicate that this would happen, nor do we deserve it. However, it all comes to pass because God uses for good what we intended as evil.

God continues to do this in our every day life, as well. We cannot avoid evil and all the suffering and problems it brings simply because we are beloved of God and forgiven by Him. Part of that is because we live in a broken world. Part of that is because we are followers of Jesus. We will continue to suffer from this day all the way to the Last Day.

Some of the suffering will be natural suffering. We live in a world that is corrupted by evil and broken by sin. Thus we endure natural disasters: earthquakes, floods, droughts, tornadoes, hurricanes, diseases, and the like.

Some of the suffering will be inflicted on us by other people. They will hurt us and reject us. They will mock us, make fun of us, and persecute us for our faith. They will inflict pain, suffering, and troubles of all kinds. All of this is real suffering and is bad. We cannot “pretty it up” and call it good.

As you know and have experienced, God does not always deliver us from our suffering and pain. St. Paul asked three times for deliverance from a “thorn in the flesh” but His request was denied each time. Perhaps, you have prayed for some sort of deliverance, rescue, or help in some sort of difficulty and God has not chosen to grant that request. Does it mean God is doing nothing? Not at all.

While God does not always deliver us from evil (at least immediately), He will use what is intended for our evil to bring about His good for us. The Word of God promises, “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” God uses all things – not just good things but also the most horribly bad things – to work for our good. (Rom. 8:28). A well known church father, St. Augustine, expressed his confidence in this truth when he said, “God is so good that He does not permit evil to be done unless He can draw great good from it.”

Granted, this may be difficult to see and even more difficult to believe in our society that stresses immediate gratification. We may expect to suffer something and then immediately see the good for which God is using it. But remember Joseph. He suffered a multitude of bad things for several decades before finally seeing the good that God was bringing out of it. Yet, throughout that time, Joseph remained faithful, trusting in the Lord’s promise. And God did not let him down.

In our suffering and and pain, we may be blessed to see the good that comes out of it. It may be in a matter of days. We may have to wait years, even decades to see the good. Or, it may be that

we won't see the good which God brought out of the evil afflicting us until we can ask Him ourselves in heaven. But don't give up. Continue to trust in the promise of God and the faithfulness of God. God's promise is sure and will not and cannot be broken. The way of the world in which good becomes bad and bad becomes worse will be reversed. The absolute worst we experience will become good for us. God will make it happen. Amen.