

August 17, 2014 / Season after Pentecost / David L. Edwards

The Work of Community

Genesis 45:1-15 *"...do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."*

Psalms 133:1 *How very good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity!*

Matthew 15:21-28 *But he did not answer her at all.*

The Lord of Love...is ever enshrined in the hearts of all. (Katha Upanishad)

The readings from Genesis and Matthew did not seem to me, at first, to have a connection. Then I began to see that both stories are about overcoming or breaking down the barriers to community that are in us. As people of faith, as religious or spiritual communities, our primary spiritual work is the recognizing, understanding, admitting, and letting go of things in us that give rise to hate, prejudice, estrangement, hostility, and violence. As we do this, we are participating in the very nature and work of God, which is to move all of life from brokenness to wholeness, from hurt to healing, from ignorance to understanding, from hate to love, from violence to peaceableness.

Joseph's emotional reconciliation with his brothers is the climax of a story of human relationships distorted by ego-centeredness, ambition, jealousy, hurt, and reprisal. In other words, real human behavior! The beauty of these great stories in Hebrew Scriptures is that they are completely real, not dressed up. They are told almost completely on the level of human actions and interactions. Yet there is always a sense that within, beneath, and through all of the human drama and trauma, Something is at work for the deeper and larger purposes of life.

As Joseph encounters and reveals himself to his brothers, he sees their lives and experiences within the scope of what God has been doing. God, the very source and power of life, has been at work all the time to bring new life, to bring reconciliation. Being in community means that we are willing to be part of the messiness of human life,

that is, to accept our real humanity. Yet we also grow in ability to see our lives within the bigger picture of what God is doing.

Joseph was not an innocent victim. Parental favoritism planted tensions between Joseph and his half-brothers. Joseph played into it, strutting around in that robe with long sleeves, flaunting his dreams of the future in which he was the hero. By the way, it was not a coat of many colors. A robe with long sleeves was designed for the life of leisure and privilege. Joseph's brothers likely wore the short-sleeved robes of those who work for a living! Joseph was treated violently by his brothers as they sold him into slavery. Yet, now Joseph is able to look back and let all of that go because he has experienced and now sees the bigger picture. Don't punish yourselves, my brothers. You did not send me here. God sent me here so that I can now provide for you in this time of famine. His love for his brothers bursts forth in tearful embraces. Now he sees that nothing is as important as their common life and well-being. They have suffered enough the consequences of their lesser, smaller selves. Now they lay it all down and embrace their true nature as God created them.

Then there is this strange story of Jesus. He has left Jewish territory and ventured into a Gentile borderland. This is symbolic--Jesus has left his comfort zone. A woman has been following Jesus and his disciples, crying out for her daughter to be freed from a demon. She is called a Canaanite. That's an old school name for Gentiles, non-Jews. It dredges up ancient hostility toward the native people of the land of Canaan when the Israelites came in and conquered them. The name is meant to arouse intense racial, ethnic, and religious prejudice and hostility. And, believe it or not, it does so in Jesus himself! He "does not answer her at all". Stone cold. This is not the only place in the gospels where Jesus' response is contrary to what we expect of a spiritual hero. Gentle Jesus, meek and mild, always ready to help everyone? Not in this story! Something else is going on.

The disciples finally plead with Jesus to send her away. Jesus does not send her away, yet he is still does not want to relate to her. You sense a struggle going on in Jesus. He finally does say something to the woman, but it is not nice! "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." Implied is, "...and not to you foreigners, you Gentiles". This woman is persistent and smart. Her suffering daughter is more important than her ego. She pleads again for help. Jesus' responds: "It is not fair to take the

children's food and give it to the dogs." Jesus has just called this woman a dog! Can you believe it? Jesus is struggling in himself just the way we do, with the prejudices and judgments we have made about people, things we have been taught by family, society, religion. He has walls within himself, just like we do. The woman does not give up: "Okay, I can accept that. But even the dogs get the crumbs that fall from the table." Something melts in Jesus. Whatever wall there was in him toward this woman crumbles. Woman, your faith is great. Let it be done for you as you wish. And her daughter is immediately healed—long distance!

This woman's faith, which has amazed Jesus, seems to have to do with her love for her daughter and her confidence that God's power is stronger than that which has possessed her daughter, and that Jesus is a servant, an instrument of that power. She calls upon Jesus' true nature, and in a sense holds him accountable for who he is called to be. She cuts through all the barriers to what is most important, most needed, most real—human beings and their need for God's constant, empowering, and healing love.

Where's the real healing? The woman's daughter? Yes. But there is also a healing in Jesus. With this woman, Jesus has confronted something in himself that prevents the fullness of God's love and power from working through him. And I find this very empowering. This story is about Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews puts it, who is the "pioneer and perfecter of our faith," the one who has gone through everything we go through, blazed the trail, as it were, to the fullness of life as God's children.

And this causes us to reflect on the barriers to community, to being our true selves, loving the way God created us to love. What I realized again with the help of these stories is that community is something that happens first of all in me! It has to do with the walls within us that we have erected between ourselves and others. Those walls, those prejudices or fears or whatever, cause us suffering and cause us to inflict suffering on others. When we are in community, we sooner or later run into these interior walls, and in community we are given the great gift of the possibility of our own healing, our own greater wholeness, our own fuller loving.

As I was working with these texts, two photographs from recent events stood out in my mind. One was of Israeli soldiers during a break from the fighting, the killing. They have prayer shawls around their shoulders and are bent over reading their Bibles. Here is the problem with religion. It can awaken in us our true humanity, or it can make us less

than human. I thought of Christian soldiers bending over their Bibles, Muslims their Qur'ans, Hindus their Bhagavad Gitas. The essence of every major religious tradition and its sacred scriptures is the essential unity of humankind, even the whole of the universe. And yet we use our scriptures to reinforce our hate, our fear, our prejudices, our violence of thought and action. The purpose of religion is not religion but our true humanity. Yet we continue to piously read our scriptures while missing what is all over their pages, what is at the heart of them.

How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters in God's love live together in unity! The second photograph I saw Friday morning. It showed Captain Ron Johnson of the Missouri State Police walking beside protesters in Ferguson MO. Another in the endless string of killings of unarmed African American young men. I read that a black man is killed by police in this country every 28 hours. Frustrations and anger spilling over into demonstrations that were met with police intimidation and assault. Peaceful protest turning to rioting. It is what happens when we bring into a situation our preset antagonisms and fears, the internal walls we have created in ourselves against others. We create the kinds of external situations that reflect what is in our hearts and minds. The policeman who shot this young man did it. The town and county police responding as an occupying military force did it. The angry and frightened protesters contributed as well. Then the governor of Missouri relieved the police departments of duty and appointed the head of that region of the state police, a man who grew up nearby Ferguson, and an African American. The next thing we saw was this state police captain and those under his command walking alongside and mingling with protesters, and the climate turning to relief, comfort and assurance, peace, even a sense of celebration. That is who we really are, and when we act upon that true identity as brothers and sisters, everything changes. We lose the fear, the anger, the violence. The demons that possess us flee as we understand they only had the power we gave them! As *The Upanishads*, the ancient spiritual writings of India, say: "We awaken from the dream (or illusion, or in our case today, the nightmare) of separateness." It is what Joseph and his brothers experienced at last. It is what Jesus experienced. It is what we can experience as we work with the nurturing of our true selves, overcoming in ourselves the things that separate us from one another. Whether or not we as a society make the hard and thorough-going changes in our systems that perpetuate this kind of

violence remains to be seen. But we start with the changes in our own hearts and minds, until we see the blessing of God in our oneness with each other and all humanity.

Spiritual growth, the spiritual life, is more about letting things go, dropping things, than it is about achieving or progressing. As we let go of our interior walls, our fears, our prejudices, the grudges we hold onto, whatever it is that is a barrier to love, our true self emerges. The smaller self, the self we hold onto so tightly, protecting and defending, loses its dominance as we remove the things that stand in the way of love. All of this can only happen as we make and continue to work with the commitment to being in community. Then we more fully, deeply, and joyfully hear the psalmist's words: "How good and pleasant it is when brothers and sisters dwell in unity! That is where the blessing is, life forevermore."

I close with this prayer from *The Upanishads*:

May we hear only what is good for all.

May we see only what is good for all.

May we serve you, Lord of Love, all our life.

May we be used to spread your peace on earth.

OM shanti shanti shanti (peace, peace, peace)