

Making Good
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Genesis 45:1-15

¹Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, ‘Send everyone away from me.’ So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph 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.

⁴ 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. ⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, “Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. ¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. ¹¹I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.’ ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

¹I ask, then, has God rejected his people? By no means! I myself am an Israelite, a descendant of Abraham, a member of the tribe of Benjamin. ²God has not rejected his people whom he foreknew. ²⁹for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable. ³⁰Just as you were once disobedient to God but have now received mercy because of their disobedience, ³¹so they have now been disobedient in order that, by the mercy shown to you, they too may now receive mercy. ³²For God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.

Like movies, other books, and *Reader’s Digest*, the Bible has a way of skipping the dull day-to-day stuff and getting directly to the interesting parts. In the story about Joseph, he moves pretty quickly from being his father’s favorite to being sold into slavery by his jealous brothers to becoming a head honcho in Egypt to having the “aha!” moment we read this morning. As you can tell, we come into the story in the middle so let’s back up a little. While Joseph was in Egypt, his family remained in Canaan. There was a great famine across all the lands and Joseph’s father sent ten of his brothers to Egypt, where he heard there was food. Joseph just happens to be the one who distributes the food and he recognizes his brothers when they do not recognize him. Seeing his youngest brother, Benjamin, missing, he pulls off

his own ruse, accusing them of being spies and tells them the only way to prove they are not is for all but one to remain in prison while the last goes and gets Benjamin to bring him back. We meet up with them once all the brothers are in Egypt and standing before Joseph again. It is this reunion that causes Joseph to weep, as we heard in the first lines.

He then tells his brothers, the same ones who sold him, “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” The picture came into focus for Joseph, realizing all the distress and difficulty and loss he had been through led him to this moment where he could help save his family because of where life had brought him. God sent him to that moment and that place and that position of power. The hardships suddenly had meaning. If you haven’t already had an experience like this, I guarantee you will. That moment when it makes sense why you didn’t get into that school, why you didn’t get that job, even why you were delayed by the cat getting sick. With the distance that time offers, events that are awful, even devastating in the moment, can be seen in the bigger picture, and the directions in which they’ve steered us become clearer, if we have the eyes to see, if we are looking for the good.

Back in college, when I met my husband, I was introduced to country music. For those of you who aren’t country music fans, Garth Brooks was a pretty big deal twenty or so years ago and he had a song called “Unanswered Prayers.” The refrain goes like this:

Sometimes I thank God for unanswered prayers
Remember when you’re talkin’ to the man upstairs
That just because he doesn’t answer doesn’t mean he don’t care
Some of God’s greatest gifts are unanswered prayers¹

There are those times in our lives that break our hearts. When good comes out of the bad, it never undoes the bad - we still carry those sorrows with us, they leave their own scars - but when good comes out of bad, it means the suffering was not in vain. The example that stays with me is the founding of the Susan G. Komen for the Cure. The website offers a succinct explanation:

Susan G. Komen fought breast cancer with her heart, body, and soul. Throughout her diagnosis, treatments, and endless days in the hospital, she spent her time thinking of ways to make life better for other women battling breast cancer instead of worrying about her own situation. That concern for others continued even as Susan neared the end of her fight. Moved by Susan’s compassion for others and committed to making a difference, Nancy G. Brinker promised her sister that she would do everything in her power to end breast cancer forever.

That promise is now Susan G. Komen for the Cure®, the global leader of the breast cancer movement, having invested more than \$1.9 billion since its inception in 1982.²

¹ Written by Pat Alger, Larry B. Bastain, Garth Brooks. Copyright © 1989 by Bait and Beer Music / Forerunner Music, Inc. / Major Bob Music Co., Inc. / Mid-Summer Music, Inc. (ASCAP). From the album *No Fences*.

I have no doubt that Nancy Brinker misses her sister still and that she would rather her still be here. The scars of that loss do not leave. And yet, in the wake of that loss, \$1.9 **billion** raised in the fight against breast cancer. \$1.9 billion. Because one woman died of breast cancer.

There are hurts and sorrows for which we can see the eventual good. And there are those that we cannot. Sometimes the pain is too great to even want to find good; sometimes it feels like finding good would trivialize the meaning and the depth of the bad. And, sometimes, the good may not be found in our lifetime. Rev. Martha Highsmith explains it well, saying “God takes the long view, always working in human history toward the fulfillment of God’s will and way.”³ God’s time is not our time, as much as we wish that it were. And so, as a people of faith, we trust that God sees the good that we cannot and that God has a hand in the process of making good, making good from the bad things that happen to us and the ones that we love, even making good from the bad things *we* do.

Our reading from Romans doesn’t shy away from the truth: “For God has imprisoned all in disobedience.” These seem harsh words, even malicious or manipulative. Why would our God of love make us disobedient? Without showing his work, Paul’s statement uses the transitive property - remember “if a = b and b = c then a = c.” What God gave to us in generosity, we have made into a prison, for God gave us free will to choose God and to choose good and instead we choose disobedience. We do things that aren’t good. The good news of the gospel is that God is merciful to all; the good news of the gospel is that God makes good out of our bad.

I was never particularly good at literary analysis in high school and I was always frustrated when a teacher would label a character as a Christ-figure - most of the time, I thought it was a stretch. In this morning’s reading from Genesis, though, I couldn’t help but see how Joseph is like God, like the God of mercy Paul speaks of in his letter to the Romans. Where Joseph could have shown wrath to his brothers who were so cruel to him, he showed kindness. We read, “You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there - since there are five more years of famine to come - so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.” Where Joseph could have demanded guilt from them, he instead offered pardon. He said, “Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here.” We make both mistakes and bad choices on purpose and, because God loves us, God shows us kindness and pardon.

² <http://ww5.komen.org/AboutUs/AboutUs.html>, 12 August 2011.

³ *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 3*, p. 352.

And not only does God show kindness and pardon to us, God even brings about good to those we harm. By no means is it OK to do wrong by others, trusting God will make good. In the same way, by no means are we to rely on God's grace and just do what we wish, counting on asking forgiveness in the end. We should still ask forgiveness and must seek to make amends. Hanging onto guilt, letting ourselves dwell on the bad in the past so much that it keeps us from making good in the present is not living to our best, though. And so, we can be relieved from our burdens, trusting in God's grace, in God's mercy, and in God's working for good throughout human history.

Part of living to our best is being a partner to God in bringing about good, both in ourselves and for others. How can your regret lead you to be better? How can your sorrow lead you to compassion? How can disappointment lead you to hope? It is so easy to dwell on what could have been or on what would have been fair or how we've been wronged. To do so, though, is to make a choice. What do you choose - to dwell on the bad in the past or to make good here and now?

Let us pray: Lord, keep strong our faith in your making good and give us the strength to be actively part of making good with you. Amen