

These August summer Sundays we have been following the remarkable story of the very tentative (one step forward-two steps back) journey of the people of God as revealed in Genesis, the first book of the Bible. This first book of what Jews call Torah takes us back to the very beginnings of time, a time when human beings, at least to our knowledge, lacked an outline or a code of conduct to guide civil life. The outline of the Law (the Code of Conduct such as the Ten Commandments and the 613 “laws” by which the chosen people were to live had not yet been revealed for they arrive in the Book of Exodus, the second book of the Bible). In light of this absence of structure, we assume human beings suffered mightily through all manner of error, pain, and grief inflicted on each other as they learned to make their way in this wild and woolly world. The wayward path of humankind, at least as revealed in Genesis, is filled with stories of needs, deeds and desires that could be the envy of the contemporary soap-opera and tabloid scene. For these stories are filled with despicable and depraved behavior of all types: greed, deceit, lust, anger, hate and even murder that would keep gentile persons awake at night with fear and dread.

In our continuing story in Genesis, we pick up the tale after last week’s abduction of Joseph by his envious brothers. Resentful of Joseph, the youngest son and the favorite of their father in his old age, the older brothers plan to rid themselves of their brother for whom they are so envious and jealous. One day when Joseph comes looking for his brothers as they tend the herds and flocks, the brothers seize him, strip off his colored robe, throw him into a pit and, rather than kill him outright, they sell him as a slave for 20 pieces of silver to traders on their way to Egypt.

Our Hebrew Scripture lesson this morning picks up this story after more than 13 years have passed. We learn that when the brothers tell their father Jacob that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, they show their father Joseph’s bloodied robe, Jacob’s grief overpowers him, diminishing his life and he is never the same.

Joseph, meanwhile, taken to Egypt has been sold to Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. Good looking and talented, Joseph proves an able manager of Potiphar’s household where he, even as a slave, has been put in charge of this large household. In time, Potiphar’s wife takes a fancy to Joseph. Joseph tactfully rebuffs each of her advances, till one day, angered when she again is denied this Israelite slave, she accuses Joseph of treachery, whereupon he is thrown into the King’s prison. We learn that even languishing in prison, Joseph demonstrates his gifts and talents and becomes the favorite of his jailers. One of his gifts is the interpretation of dreams. Showing his prowess in discerning dreams (Joseph he is called the dreamer) Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of inmates in the jail. Years later one of them, having been released from prison, remembers Joseph’s uncanny ability to interpret dreams. As a confidant of Pharaoh, he shares this information with Pharaoh who has himself had a series of disturbing dreams. Summoned to Pharaoh, Joseph interprets Pharaoh’s dreams (remember the seven fat and sleek cows, the seven ugly and thin cows and the ears of grain?) when all the magicians and wise men of the Kingdom cannot interpret the dream, Joseph accurately interprets Pharaoh’s dream and Joseph’s predictions come true.

Awed by the wisdom of this Israelite slave, Pharaoh makes Joseph the steward over not only his own palace but the whole of his Kingdom, giving Joseph a signet ring, fine clothes, and gold as symbols of his new power and authority: Joseph becomes Secretary of state, agriculture and the treasury all rolled into one. Wisely, during years of abundance in Egypt Joseph orders that great stores of grain set aside for indeed, his prediction that famine will strike the land comes true. During these years of famine, Jacob in the land of Canaan, hearing of the abundance in Egypt, sends 10 of his 12 sons to purchase food. Arriving in Egypt, the brothers begin negotiations with Joseph, and all the while do not recognize him even as Joseph is overcome with great feeling. After some give and take with his brothers— inquiring about the well-being of his father and other brother, sending them back to Canaan that they bring their youngest brother to Egypt, we come to the words from our lesson today. Here Joseph—bursting with emotion in the reunion with his brothers who had betrayed him—cries out, declaring that he is Joseph, alive; the brother whom they sold into slavery given up for dead. Stunned by this revelation, the brothers cannot speak a word. In their long silence in which undoubtedly each cycles again and again over the terrible deed they have done to their brother, consumed with self-loathing on account of that envy which drove them to this deed in which they sold their brother into slavery, Joseph speaks. He speaks words and he demonstrates with his whole life something vital, something crucial, something that perhaps we cannot fully comprehend but with which we must wrestle those of us desiring to live in and with God.

Joseph’s words are words of faith; words of absolution; and words of forgiveness toward his brothers. Indeed, they are more than words for Joseph does what he says he will do. In that circumstance, when Joseph could have said or done anything and all of us would have nodded our heads in agreement, speaks from his heart giving praise to God. *“Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, ...for God sent me before you to preserve life....So it was not you who sent me here, but God....God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you....”* And he kissed all his brothers and wept on them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

Invidia is the Latin name of one of the seven deadly sins known as envy. It is said that of all the sins, it is the nastiest and meanest since its appetite never ceases. It consumes a person in endless torment making them want what they know they do not deserve. Envy is not merely grieving on account of another's good, the element of pride – but a grieving because one regards that good as diminishing one's own self, bringing some disgrace on oneself.

Grieving that one does not have something that another has is not envy, says the theologian; it becomes a sin when the envious person wishes that the other did not have it, so that one might not suffer an imaginary disadvantage. The envious are filled day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute, with a bitter regret for what they cannot have or be, and one way of attempting to surmount that dejection is to deny that what they lack was worth having or being in the first place. Envy attempts to level, if not eradicate, what it cannot emulate. The Parson in the Canterbury Tales calls envy “that foul sin...the worst sin there is” because it is “against all virtues and goodness.” Joseph's brothers were filled with envy towards their brother. If they could not have that special relationship Joseph enjoyed with their father, Jacob, then the brothers would level the playing field by doing away with him. If they could not share that special love, then no one would have it. And so they sell their brother for 20 pieces of silver and the whole family – their father overcome with grief who gives up, ceasing to care about life, and the brothers now shamed, are never the same again.

When we are envious, what do we feel? Those of us overcome with envy cannot bear it that good fortune or some other unknowable power, fate or destiny, or perhaps even God, has conferred a good on someone else. There has to be a reason, if only we could find that reason. Our hunger to figure it out whets our endless appetite for self-torment. When we are envious, we are moved, first and last, by our lack of self-esteem. We are unable to love for we are not grateful for, or happy in, who we are and what we have. The sin is deadly, less because it destroys us than because it will not let us live. It will not let us live as ourselves, grateful for our qualities and talents, such as they are, making the best and most rewarding use of them. We so easily disparage others which is of course as disparagement ourselves; regarding ourselves with as much malice as we regard others.

Most insidious about envy is that it is a continual source of discord for sows strife within families, between colleagues, neighbors, and yes, even and especially church communities. When that happens there is an atmosphere of distrust, ill-ease, contention and malice—the sound of murmuring and whisperings of doubt, suspicion and gossip. Remember Jesus' disciples when they wonder amongst themselves which of them is the greater?

How can such a vicious cycle of envy and distrust be broken? By the love of God. Of being able to claim God's love for us, even those of us filled with self-loathing for what we have done and left undone – those of us who assume we are beyond the reach of God, those of us who could never be loved.

You have heard about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission created by Nelson Mandela in 1994 and 95 upon becoming President of South Africa following the transformation of that country after apartheid. The Commission, headed by Desmond Tutu, one-time Archbishop of South Africa, was empowered to grant amnesty to those who committed human rights violations and abuses during the apartheid era. Its purpose was to restore victims their dignity by uncovering the truth of crimes and abuses on the part of the apartheid government as well as the ANC, that through amnesty and forgiveness the nation could begin a healing process. The Commission had no authority to level any form of punishment but only to seek the truth that all sides acknowledge their deeds and to seek healing and forgiveness (amnesty) going forward. Archbishop Tutu has written a significant account of that experience in: No Future Without Forgiveness, which is the very words that Joseph speaks over his brothers.

I suspect that many of us, hearing this story of Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, of being able to find the grace within his heart to see his way beyond punishment and retribution, as well as Jesus' forgiveness of his tormentors on the cross and all of us of our sinfulness, pride and envy cannot quite imagine how that is possible in this world. It appears far beyond our ability to do and fulfill.

And yet, with God and in God, all things are possible. And thus I invite you, even as you have been forgiven to forgive. To forgive, and to forgive and to forgive. We need to practice, not that we become perfect, but that we become like God willing to believe and trust and to love.