

Children of the Locusts

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Genesis 41:53- 42:8

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Jean is one of the most astonishing women I've ever met. She teaches at Stanford University. She is smart, funny, and, incredibly energetic although she is twenty years beyond the age when most people have retired. She is a dear, dear friend.

Today I shall tell you the *second* best story Jean has ever told me. Regretfully, I can't tell you the best story she's told me, at least not in church.

Jean says that one day when she was in college she had a conversation with her beloved pastor. Her pastor must have been as smitten with Jean's intelligence and wit as I am, but he knew his job as a spiritual director. And, so, when Jean laughingly told her pastor about a person whose comments she had dismissed with a withering remark, her pastor remained silent.

His silence echoed around the room. His silence got louder and louder and Jean became more and more uncomfortable.

Finally her pastor spoke. "Jean, your biggest challenge is being kind to people who bore you."

She confessed to me that this has been a lifelong struggle. I suspect it is for a lot of people.

Seven hundred years ago, Thomas a Kempis wrote that he would rather know a person who is contrite than someone who can explain the theology of contrition. I read that passage thirty years ago for the first time, and it still stings me.

That's probably why when I began the spiritual practice of taking the set of vows called the Disciplines of Mindfulness, or the Bodhisattva Vows, as my spiritual practices for Lent, there's one vow in particular that has been hardest for me.

This vow says: *I promise to greet all others with compassion and interest.*

Without any doubt, this has been the hardest vow I've taken. It requires that I pause, and listen, and take seriously, and attend to the comments of others, that I not only hear them, but listen to them with courtesy, respect, interest and compassion.

As I said, this vow has been challenging, but it has also changed me, slowly, very slowly, like water dripping on a rock until an indentation begins to appear.

Today's story is from the epic legend of Joseph, a man who is seen in Hebrew Scripture as the one and only *Tzaddik*, or "Just Person," of all the Patriarchs. Not Abraham, not even Moses, is called the Just, a *Tzaddik*. Only Joseph. And Joseph also holds a special place in Christianity as a type or model for Christ.

This may strike a careful reader as strange. Joseph lorded it over his brothers. He flaunted his father's favor. He showed off in the clothes his father gave him. He bragged that he would rule over his brothers and his parents.

Consequently, his brothers grew to resent him so much that they sold him into slavery. And in Egypt, the land of his bondage, he experienced rises and falls from power, most spectacularly because he spurned the advances of Potiphar's wife, the Lady Chatterly of ancient Egypt.

After Joseph rose again from prison to power as Pharaoh's right-hand man, he enjoyed all the wealth and privilege you can know, married an aristocratic Egyptian woman, fully assimilated to Egyptian customs, named his first son, "*God has made me forget all my tribulations and the house of my father*" and his second son, "*God has made me fruitful in the land of my misery.*"

Nothing so far in Joseph's story, except perhaps his rejection of the sexual advances of his master's wife, stand out as particularly just or righteous. Nothing, that is, until famine strikes the land of his father.

Then his brothers came down to Egypt to purchase grain. And, even then, Joseph's behavior toward his brothers is cruel. He takes revenge upon them, causing them and his father Jacob to suffer.

Joseph hides his identity from his brothers. He knows them but they don't recognize him. This is not surprising. Joseph is, in manners, dress, appearance, a high ranking Egyptian official. And he uses his position to make his brothers and his whole family miserable and anxious.

So, why in the world would such a man be called a *Tzaddik*, a Just Person, a Righteous Person? The answer lies in the meaning of the word *Tzaddik* and in the surprising turn of events that occurs at the climax of Joseph's story.*

The word *Tzaddik*, in ancient Hebrew, is related to a similar Arabic word meaning "friend." In Hebrew the word *Tzaddik* means the opposite of *Rasha*, or a wicked person. A wicked person, *Rasha*, in contrast to a righteous person, *Tzaddik*, is one who sins against other people, not necessarily against God.*

A wicked person, in this context, is one who deserts his community, who betrays his friends, who treats neighbors and others with contempt and disdain, who conspires against his brothers. A wicked person, in short, is a person who gives in to the very temptations that had characterized much of Joseph's life up to this point.

Up to this point!

And this is where we discover that Joseph's long story, with all its rabbit trails and digressions and seemingly irrelevant details, is ultimately the story of transformation, the transformation of an ordinary man on the way to becoming a wicked man becomes instead into a *Tzaddik*, a Just Person, an example for all of Israel.*

Somewhere deep within Joseph's character there was something true, something real, something good to draw upon. Perhaps he felt within himself again the suffering that he had known, the rejection of his brothers, and perhaps touching again his own pain, compassion for others was awakened in him.*

In the crucial moment, as Elie Wiesel says, Joseph overcame his bitterness, his desire for revenge, his long-smoldering resentment against his brothers. Even if the ravages of locusts and the desperate want of famine were the instruments of necessity that drove his brothers to his door, eventually Joseph overcame all the reasons he had to repudiate them.*

Elie Wiesel goes on to say something that I think we as Protestant Christians particularly need to hear: "One is not born a *Tzaddik* [a Just Person]; one must become one. And having become a *Tzaddik*, one must strive to remain one."*

In all the stories of the Patriarchs there is no better example of G. K. Chesterton's insight: "*You can alter the place to which you are going, but you cannot alter the place from which you have come.*"** Our past provides the raw material from which we are constructed, but there is much left up to us.

Joseph became the Tzaddik, the Just Man of Israel, the Just Patriarch, the great exemplar of what it means to show interest and compassion to others, to treat others as we wish to be treated. And so Joseph also came to be seen by the early church as a model for Christ.

And, if I may be so bold: I think Joseph is even more important for us as a model of humanity *that just won't give up on itself*.

There is in all of us that which we must overcome if we want to be good and true and right, if we want to be truly human, if we want to be good friends, good brothers and good sisters, good children and good parents. And having achieved our goal today, doesn't mean we can stop trying tomorrow. There are aspects of our life together that need our attention every day.

However far grace has brought us, there's still work enough for us to do.

Amen.

*Elie Wiesel's study of the Hebrew text, the Midrashic storytellers and Talmudic sources were indispensable to this sermon. He brings all of this scholarship to bear in his beautiful essay, "Joseph, or The Education of a Tzaddik," in his *Messengers of God* (1975), pp. 153-182. I am also indebted to an essay by Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky on Joseph's interpretation of dreams in David Rosenberg, ed., *Genesis: Contemporary Writers on Our First Stories* (1996), pp. 203-208.

**G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), p. 201.