

The End of the Church

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Genesis 45:3-15

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We open the Bible looking for answers to our problems, but often what we find is not so much a magic potion or an escape portal, but what we find instead is that the bible functions as a mirror, not so much a mirror in which we see our own faces, but a mirror that shows in the lives of Abraham or Isaac or Joseph and his brothers, the same sibling rivalries, the same dysfunction, the same frayed relationships, the same treachery, deception, and brokenness that we often see in our own lives. A favored youngest sibling who preens and taunts his older siblings until he pushes them over the edge and they want to do him in. Jealous siblings who are willing to go to extremes and erase the favored child right out of existence. First, they throw him in a pit and leave him for dead; then they think better of straight up fratricide and instead opt to erase him from their lives and sell him to some nomadic traders passing through. Off Joseph goes toward Egypt never to be seen again. Or so it appears.

Sometimes the bible does not hold up so much as a moral ideal for how we are supposed to live or as a piece of sacred text that show us some kind of airbrushed perfection version of human relationships. Instead, we get hubris, betrayal, guilt, regret, and perhaps the whole gamut of human emotions and behaviors. In other words, we get us. And we the worst in our own tendencies playing out; wishing revenge on someone and carrying it out...betraying someone close to us over petty rivalries...thinking we can erase someone from existence or at the very least, erase them from our any cumbersome entanglements, any responsibilities or obligations of love, just cut them loose and get them out of our lives, so we don't have them and their annoying characteristics, features, and personas bearing down on us anymore. I love this passage from Genesis because when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers we are told that they were dismayed to be in his presence.' We thought we had erased him from our lives they thought as they were in shock. We thought we would never see him again as they stand white as ghosts before him. What is going to happen to us now. They are afraid for their lives. We all know how revenge works. Perhaps Joseph already has something special planned for them. Revenge, they say, is best served cold. That has to be running through Joseph's brothers minds as they stand with their hat in their hands before the very person who they thought they had engineered out of their existence; the very person they are now asking for help. Former US President and earthy language Texan Lyndon B. Johnson once said that if you are going to tell someone 'to go to hell,' then you better make sure that you can make them go there. In other words, don't write them off, don't try and erase them out of existence, if there is a chance they may re-emerge, reappear, and god forbid you might be at their mercy. And that is exactly what happens here with Joseph. And such thoughts have to be running through his brother's minds as

they now stand before the only source of salvation, the one they betrayed and tried to airbrush out of existence. 'Come closer to me,' Joseph requests. Can you imagine? I'm good, Joseph, I think I'll keep my distance. But what choice do they have. So, they come closer with trepidation and an increase in anxiety. And Joseph reminds them of exactly who he is: 'I am your brother, Joseph whom you sold into Egypt...' here we go, he is about to turn the tables on them and even the score...and then a miracle happens...'and now do not be distressed or angry...it was not you who sent me here but God...to preserve life...for me to provide for you...or as Joseph says at the end of Genesis in chapter 50, 'you meant it for evil, but God intended it for good' (Genesis 50:21). Just an astonishing thing happens and the most surprised of all are the very perpetrators who deserve wrath and revenge and instead receive grace and new life. I dare say Genesis ends with what becomes a pattern throughout scripture of a broken and dysfunctional humanity who deserve to only be seen as a dysfunctional and disappointing to God instead becoming the objects of God's mercy. Humanity continues to spiral into various levels of confusion and turmoil, and God continues to find ways to bring about redemption.

None of us go looking for tragedy or tragic circumstances, but so much of human existence is full of them. And God is not a puppeteer or helicopter parent trying to prevent us from experiencing anything bad, but throughout Genesis we see God working good out of humanity's evil intentions, we see God working redemption out of what only looks like betrayal and duplicity, we see God working reconciliation through a life that was thought to have been erased out of existence. 'You meant it for evil,' Joseph declares, 'but God intended it for good.' For many generations, Presbyterians were expected to know a good portion of the Westminster Catechism by heart. Today our pedagogical styles rely less on memorization, but perhaps you are familiar with the first question of the Westminster catechism, 'What is man's chief end,' or better put more inclusively, 'What is humanity's chief end?' The answer of course is that our chief end is to glorify God and enjoy God forever. But maybe that is the chief end of the church and certainly with Russian tanks surrounding the Ukraine and plotting naked aggression and inflation continuing to go up and what seem to be unending iterations of the coronavirus wreaking havoc on our lives, glorifying God and enjoying God forever, may be no easy task. But I wonder if the chief end of the church might also have another dimension and responsibility in this world, to work for reconciliation, to practice a forgiveness like Joseph with his brothers, to work for good in this world even when so much is intended for evil.

I grew up in an idyllic small town and grew up in what was a postcard looking Presbyterian church. Not just on the surface, but the people in that Christian community were and are beautiful both inside and out. The summer before I began fifth grade, an inexplicable thing took place that threatened to shatter that congregation and the whole community. A mother and her son, he was my same age and a member of my confirmation class, were abducted as they were leaving church and later murdered that day. It threw our

little community and church into turmoil. People grew fearful and distrustful. No one felt safe anymore. No one was quite sure what was happening. It turned out the perpetrator was a serial offender who had been released from prison a couple months before and these innocent people who just happened to be going home from church were his collateral damage in order to get whatever cash and valuables they happened to have with them. He was a tragic figure himself having come into this world on the dirt floor of a bar in an impoverished community on the edge of town. It was a story and circumstances of biblical proportions.

It is a story not unlike what we find here in Genesis. Lives taken inexplicably. A community in turmoil. A case for revenge. In fact, I can remember seeing materials sent to the church from the Ku Klux Klan trying to fan the flames of racial resentment and revenge in the aftermath of the murder. But what I remember seeing in the life of that congregation was a community of reconciliation, a community that came together with churches and people and members of the community from different backgrounds and races to work for a stronger friendships, closer neighbors, and community that worked harder to look out for each other. The church did not do it all; it stood next to other churches, other community organizations, not to mention local government and community civic groups, but rather than stoke the fires of resentment, revenge, and frayed relations, the end of the church was to work for reconciliation, restoration, and to be a community of redemption. The loss of these innocent lives would not cascade into the unraveling of everyone's lives, but in the midst of a truly evil act, God was at work bringing about redemption in the midst of an event that could have spiraled everyone down into the depths and led us to become our worst selves and reduced the community to the lowest common denominator of kill or be killed.

Just as two lines run through Genesis, two lines run through those circumstances in my mind's memory. The worst of humanity at work in the world and the activity of God refusing to let such tragic events have the last word, giving us the end and purpose to pick up the pieces and work for a humanity that is not defined by betrayal, random slayings, and demonized 'others.' We are not always good at it ourselves, but no other organization in the world has such a mandate hanging over us. We are the only community that exists to glorify and enjoy God, but also to live as a community that is more than just a collection of our worst impulses, a community that exists not because we are favored, but because we are forgiven, a community that believes reconciliation is possible, even in the worst of circumstances. We may intend it for evil, we may intend ourselves for evil, but God does not. And even when life seems to be erased out of existence forever, God is able to bring about grace and reconciliation. No matter how far we descend into various levels of confusion and turmoil, God continues to find ways to bring about redemption. You intended it for evil, but God used it for good. Again and again and again.