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Sermon: A Dish Best Served...  
Text: Genesis 45:1-15  
August 20, 2023

### Genesis 45:1-15

<sup>4</sup> Then 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. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph 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.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So 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. <sup>9</sup> Hurry 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> 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.' <sup>12</sup> And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup> You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." <sup>14</sup> Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them, and after that his brothers talked with him.

So recently I had some behavior I thought was unique phenomenon to me, but it was recently reinforced on a much larger scale. I will try and describe it this way...you are watching television on a lazy Saturday afternoon. It's not football season yet, I've already streamed everything good, and so it is time to start flipping channels and surveying the options. Usually, about this time as the channels go passing by, you can probably hear more than audible sigh or groan from other members of my family. And then suddenly, like an oasis in middle of the channel-surfing desert, we land on the Godfather saga right in the middle of a classic scene or if not that, a close second is landing on Ray Liotta and Joe Pesci in their portrayal of Goodfellas. If you thought the audible sighs and protests were loud before we landed on The Godfather, everyone knows if the protest does not work now, we'll have to hunker down for the duration. Now until recently I thought this was a phenomenon unique to me, but according to the recently released Barbie movie, it may be a trait that extends more broadly to a significant portion of the

male gender. A magnetic attraction to Francis Ford Coppola's classic film and the ability to swerve into it wherever it is on the television dial.

What on earth do my visions of Al Pacino and obsessions with Robert DeNiro have to do with Joseph and his brothers and our gathering here. Quite a lot actually. It's almost like Joseph's brothers have been conditioned their whole lives watching those classic revenge scenes from the Godfather: the kiss of death from Michael, the making of an 'offer he can't refuse,' from Marlon Brando, the elimination of the heads of the five families while Michael's nephew is getting baptized and he is participating as the actual godfather in the service, and then there is the less glamorous and more gritty turning on each other that occurs in Goodfellas after pulling off the Lufthansa heist in 1978. Some warped sense of mercy, forgiveness, and reconciliation may take place, but only so that you can keep your friends close but your enemies closer, so that when the time is right and everyone feels comfortable, you can take them all out.

Those thoughts have to be running through Joseph's brothers minds when he invites them in close for reconciliation and an embrace after they sold him out of the family and faked his death, lied to their father, and tried to erase him from their lives forever. Listen to the last verse of our lesson: 'and he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them.' Oh we all know what is going to happen next. We have seen the Godfather, we have bingewatched the Sopranos, and we can quote from Goodfellas extensively. Joseph has his brothers right where he wants them, so now that he has coaxed them in close and given them the kiss of death, he can lower the boom and they won't ever see it coming. Except that is not what happens at all. The episode ends with Joseph and his brothers both weeping and gathered up in an embrace of forgiveness before which is brothers plea for leniency and even offer themselves to be enslaved so that Joseph will not exact revenge. Instead of settling scores, Joseph declares to them, 'even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.' You meant it for evil, but God was able to make something beautiful from it, to overcome evil with good. Far from giving us what we want, a dish of revenge perfectly served up on a cold platter, Joseph gives us something we could have scarcely imagined.

Not long ago I heard a story about the comedian, actor, filmmaker, and former Saturday Night live cast member Adam Sandler. In his early years, he was a struggling actor trying to climb the rungs and find success in his field at NYU drama school. About halfway through the program, one of his professors

stopped him after class and invited him out for a drink. As someone who had toiled rather anonymously through acting school, a professor had never taken the time to take an interest in Sandler at all, so it intrigued him and excited him that a professor would take the time to reach out and mentor him. As they shared the moment together, the professor was brutally honest with the acting student and said he thought he was a nice guy and working really hard, but that in no uncertain terms let it be known that he was not cut out for acting, that he was trying to do him a favor and save him from a lot of heartache, and that he should not continue to pursue this calling and this dream. Sandler did not heed his professor's advice and continue to pursue his dream and his calling, finding success not only on Saturday Night Live, but also on the big screen, acting in but also producing and writing numerous films. Long after his acting career had taken off, Sandler found himself back in New York City out for the evening with friends and colleagues and as fate would have it that evening there was also that professor from drama school who had taken him out for a drink to deliver his honest assessment. Cue 'The Godfather.' Time to settle scores. Time to publicly humiliate that professor in front of all his friends and colleagues. Time to exact revenge and prove how wrong he was. But according to the story, Sandler greeted the professor, embraced him, and brought him over to his table of friends and said to them all: 'I'd like to introduce you to the only professor from acting school who was ever decent enough to take me out for a drink.' And they embraced him and made room for him at the table.

In a recent piece in *The Atlantic*, David Brooks surveys the existential crisis in our country right now and takes a stab at diagnosing it as an 'emotional, relational, and spiritual crisis,' which is contributing to much of our political dysfunction, societal violence, the coarsening of our rhetoric, and the distrust of our democratic institutions. Brooks continues: 'the most important story about why Americans have become sad and alienated and rude, I believe is also the simplest: we inhabit a society in which people are no longer trained to treat others with kindness and consideration. Our society has become one in which people feel licensed to give their selfishness free rein...In a healthy society, a web of institutions—families, schools, religious groups, community organizations, and workplaces—helps form people into kind and responsible citizens, the sort of people who show up for one another.'<sup>1</sup> Brooks

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<sup>1</sup> David Brooks, 'How American Got Mean,' in *The Atlantic* (August 14, 2023).

believes our crisis is rooted, not in our ability to create great opportunities for people to make a living, but in our ability to nurture opportunities to make lives. Form character. Build relationships. Know our neighbors. Pray for our enemies. Begin our most heated arguments and certainties, by confessing, 'I could be wrong, but here is what I think about this....' Former leader of the Southern Baptist Convention and current editor for Christianity Today, evangelical Russel Moore, in a recent interview with NPR, mentioned that multiple pastors told him that 'they would quote from the Sermon on the Mount, specifically the part that says to 'turn the other cheek,' when preaching. Someone would come up after the service and ask, 'Where did you get those liberal talking points?' Moore had this to say: 'What was alarming to me is that inmost of these scenarios, when the pastor would say, 'I'm literally quoting Jesus Christ,' the response would not be, 'I apologize.' The response would be, 'Yes, but that doesn't work anymore. That's weak.' Moore added: 'When we get to the point where the teachings of Jesus himself are seen as subversive to us, then we're in crisis.'<sup>2</sup> My only issue is with the very last sentence of the statement. That is surprising to him that Jesus' words and action and grace and mercy would be subversive. They are always subversive, and not just to conservative evangelicals but to single-minded self-righteous progressives too. To find Jesus subversive probably just means we are actually understanding him accurately and clearly, whatever our ideological sensibilities might be.

This past week, I had the opportunity to participate in the Frederick Douglass Project for Justice at the Hunt Correctional Center of the Louisiana Department of Corrections, which along with Angola hosts a significant population of our state's long-term imprisoned population. A group of about ten community participants had the opportunity to tour the prison facilities, meet with incarcerated residents in small groups, ask questions about their prison experience, and learn more about ways they are preparing and working toward reentry after they have served their sentences. I asked one of the incarcerated residents what he thought was important to tell members of my congregation when I returned. He said this: 'please tell them we are not animals in here trying to kill each other or destroy each other's lives. We are just like them, trying to better our lives and develop into the people God has

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<sup>2</sup> Tori Otten, 'Christianity Today Editor: Evangelicals Call Jesus 'Liberal,' and 'Weak,' in *The New Republic*, August 10, 2023. [Christianity Today Editor: Evangelicals Call Jesus "Liberal" and "Weak" | The New Republic](#)

called us to be.' As we sat in a circle, inmates sitting next to members from the outside all together in the middle of the chapel, our guide and leader of the project who worked for the parole project, who led us inside, who we relied on to tell us where to go and what to expect, began our discussion by revealing that he himself was formerly incarcerated and had served a life sentence and had been released five years ago. His life's work now was working with the incarcerated to help them be prepared for life on the outside, to work against recidivism, and to make sure they had good opportunities after serving their prison sentence. Then he revealed that he had just returned from spending the weekend with the daughter of his victims, with whom he had not only reconciled but had worked to develop a genuine friendship. The woman, now seventy years old, had not only forgiven him, but told him she loved him. About the circumstances of the whole situation, he had this to say: 'although I am not proud of my actions decades ago, God turned it into something beautiful.' Joseph, was that you in there?

I'll be honest with you, there was a part of me that almost could not comprehend what I was hearing and seeing and watching unfold. And part of it felt subversive to me. Could it really be true that a world exists right in the middle of this one where lives are redeemed and forgiveness is practiced and justice can be restorative? A bunch of lives left for dead, a bunch of family betrayal and societal dysfunction that is simply too much to bear. A world and a church and even Christians that seem to prefer almost any sort of resolution or explanation than the one offered through the grace right in front of us. And woven through it all a God whose subversive grace not only offends our desire to exact revenge on our own terms, but also a God whose grace also offends our own sense of righteousness, even as it forgives us and redeems us and tethers us to people we weren't able to write off. Sometimes, sometimes we would not believe it if we had not seen it ourselves. And sometimes these sermons just write themselves. Thanks be to God.