

“Reconciliation, Resistance & Redemption”

A, Pentecost 11; 10:00 am

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; 45:1-15; August 20, 2017

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. FAMILY DYSFUNCTION & JOE

Ah, the original dysfunctional family! Well, not quite the *original*, but one of the early ones. Adam and Eve, with their sons killing each other, probably got a leg up on Jacob, Leah and Rachel and their gang of boys and one girl.

But here we have “the rest of the story.” After the bullying by the big brothers and the selling down the river. Here we have quite a touching story of reconciliation and restoration of a relationship.

After all that has transpired; all the water under the bridge, Joseph is moved to invite his brothers in, to gather round the table and to put their differences behind them. They learn of his identity, and also get a glimpse of his forgiving heart. They betrayed him, and now he is in a position to take revenge. But, instead of angry and vengeful, he is weeping and wanting nothing more than to see his family again.

II. RECONCILIATION RESPONSE

I picked this scripture and this story from the Hebrew Bible several weeks ago. I wanted to focus on reconciliation and restored relationships for a number of reasons. Then, Charlottesville happened last week, and the topic became ever-so-much-more important.

The **questions** flooded the airwaves all week long. What is a faithful, Christ-like response to what happened there that day? For *not* to respond, as people of faith, is *not* an acceptable choice.

What would Jesus do, in light of such a conflicted, confusing tragedy?

We know as followers of Jesus we are all to be reconcilers. To “love our neighbor as ourselves.” ALL our neighbors. To love our enemies. To pray for those who persecute us. But also to stand with the oppressed; to speak for those who have no voice.

How do you *reconcile* with evil? Or maybe you don’t? What if people have different ideas on whether people are perpetrating evil or just gathering peacefully, as is their civil right?

When is the faithful response to reconcile and when is it to just say NO?! When do we stand up to values opposed to our own, and when do we welcome those we disagree with to the Table?

Can you welcome others to the table and dialogue when they don’t *want* to dialogue? Aren’t open to love?

When do you say, “not in my back yard” and urge businesses not to host hate groups? Even if it is technically discrimination based on values? When is NIMBY a GOOD thing?! (Not In My Back Yard).

Remember when we talked about Jacob wrestling with God, and I mentioned that sermons can often be a wrestling match all week long? Well, there you have it! This week.

III. LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR—ALL THE TIME?

The questions flew through the airwaves and in all of our minds because there *is no* easy answer—nor *should* there be. (If you see anyone spouting “The EASY Button” like a Staples ad, kindly challenge them to think further, broader and deeper. Please.)

A cousin of mine shared that she *wanted* to stand up to hate and send a resounding NO! Wanted to tell anyone that actions stemming from hate and denial of human rights were *not okay*.

But, she was struggling with the command by Jesus to **love**. Love our neighbor, our enemy. Everybody—even those we don't agree with.

Her words: "I wanted so much to say, me too, me too. Then, I actually remembered something that I heard in Church on Sunday! Aren't we supposed to love our enemies as we love ourselves?"

I struggled too, and thought long and hard about how to respond. Then I read her post more closely, and saw that she had conflated two of Jesus' commands into one—something that really doesn't hold together. Did you catch it?

But, even clearing *that* up didn't *really* get to the heart of the matter. My best response midweek was this:

"Nope. That's *not* what Jesus said. "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Love does *not* mean: accept the unacceptable, allow evil to prosper or hate to win the day. When so many of our neighbors are in danger, living in fear for their very lives, and have no one to stand up for and with them, then if we follow Jesus, we have no choice but to speak a resounding NO! to that spirit and fear."

The swirl didn't die down. Ministers, leaders, scholars, people who've studied the bible in depth and folks who tend to quote it without really knowing what it says all wrestled: "Aren't we supposed to love everybody? Equally?" To love like Jesus did?

And, how do we love those who are the *victims* of hate? If we *accept* or turn a blind eye to those doing hateful things, telling ourselves that we must love everybody, even the haters, how is that loving our *other* neighbor?

I took another stab at it on Friday to share with you: "Resisting those promoting hate in order to stand with those being hurt, does *not* mean we're not loving all people. Jesus

didn't say to "love that which is evil." And the enemy is *us*, too, when we are silent, indifferent or blind to *our* complicity in systemic evil.

Any acceptance or "normalizing" of white supremacy is being part of the evil and is abandoning our neighbor of any color. "Render to no one evil for evil," Jesus said. We cannot allow the evil to render.

In a word, "Love your neighbor" can NOT mean *accepting* their hatred and unloving actions toward our *other* neighbors. It's a complex command, for sure!

Loving our neighbors, *or* our enemies, when they don't love each *other*, calls for even greater response and deeper dedication to prayer for guidance. The tougher it gets, the more we need to be on our knees! (Can I get an amen?!)

And, the tougher it gets between us, the more we need to be truly *listening*—not spouting opinions and clinging to our beliefs about the way the world works—to the point that we can't open ourselves to new ways of seeing, hearing and following Christ into the messiness of it all.

Jesus ALSO commanded his disciples to "shake the dust off your feet" when their message—their good news of the gospel—was not welcome. When *our* efforts at spreading love, our invitations to dialogue and our attempts to bring peace and reconciliation among our neighbors are *not* welcomed, not received with open arms, and the conflict redeemed, then what?

Do we shake off the dust? Do we turn the other cheek? Do we walk sadly away, ignoring the cries of the *hatees* (of *any* race, color and walk of life?) who desperately need us to stand alongside them for strength and resistance?

IV. JOSEPH'S WAY

Back to our story for guidance. Were Joe's brothers remorseful? Had they apologized? Repented? What was their motive now? Simply survival? Were they merely hangers' on, capitalizing on the news that had been leaked that the new Pharaoh's right-hand man was *none* other than their long-lost relative?!

Actually, there's a "Rest of the Story" here. In *today's* episode, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and they talk together. But a *lot* more comes down the pike before the end of the book. Many events and ups and down in their relationship transpire and have to be worked through before, finally, in chapter 50, at Father Jacob's behest, Joseph forgives his brothers and declares:

"What you intended for evil, God has meant for good."
"You sold me down the river to Egypt and God used me there to save people.

And *that* is the definition of redemption

If Joseph's brothers had all showed up, not seeking to reconcile, but demanding that he was their "blood kin" and therefore owed it to them to take care of the whole family during the drought, lest they starve, how would the whole scene have been different? What would Joseph have done then?

What would be the faithful, loving response to his own brothers if they were not coming in love and seeking reconciliation and perhaps forgiveness for the terrible way they had destroyed his life—or so they thought.

Remember, they sold him down the river, threw him under the bus, tied him up and sold him to slave traders!! It was not a minor little "teasing behind the woodshed till Dad showed up." It was life-altering and potentially death-causing.

What if *they* came in a spirit of hate and overpowering numbers, seeking to instill fear in Joseph to get their demands met, rather than contrite trembling, hoping for a small crumb of bread and forgiveness?

Ecclesiastes wisdom for our day:

There's a time for every purpose under Heaven

A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones together

A time to welcome to the table. A time to overturn the table

A time to love our neighbor. A time to speak the truth in love and speak against our neighbors' hate.

A time to speak truth to power.

A time to invite the Pharisees to dinner; a time to call a spade a spade. Or a "brood of vipers." (like Jesus did)

A time for taking sides. A time for bringing differing sides together.

A time for speaking love and a time for "speaking the truth in love" when our fellow human beings are on a path bent toward destruction.

V. CAN GOD'S LOVE REDEEM HATE?

A. Where Do We Go From Here?

Fifty years ago this week, Martin Luther King Jr. gave a speech called "Where Do We Go From Here?" We must ask ourselves this same question—in our own lives, our homes, our congregation, our community, country and world.

King had some wisdom to share, and we've heard these words many times over many years, but we need to hear them again with new ears, as we re-ask the question of the hour: where do we go from here?

"I have decided to stick with love, for I know that love is ultimately the only answer to mankind's problems. And I'm going to talk about it everywhere I go. I know it isn't popular to talk about it in some circles today. And I'm not talking about emotional bosh when I talk about love; I'm talking about a strong, demanding love.

For I have seen too much hate. I've seen too much hate on the faces of [my fellow citizens], and hate is too great a burden to bear. I have decided to love. And the beautiful thing is that God is love. (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Where DO we go from here? Chaos or Community?

B. Marching in C-ville

Kelly Gallagher, a clergy woman who was in Charlottesville last Saturday, told of her first-hand experience. There with “boots on the ground” these clergy marched, not to protest, but to pray. They chose to bring light to overcome darkness and love to overcome hate.

“We lined up and began to pray. We prayed for love. We prayed for the hearts of all those present. We prayed that hatred and violence would cease, and we prayed for the strength to stand in the name of love throughout the day.

“As the hate groups began to arrive, group by group, they would file down the sidewalk between our line of clergy and the line of militia, hitting us with their flags, insults and spit. Their rhetoric flowed so easily from their hearts. In response, we sang. We sang “This Little Light of Mine,” “Over My Head” and “Oh Freedom.”

We chanted “Love Has Already Won” over and over. And as the people of Charlottesville gathered behind us they began to sing and chant as well. With that song and prayer and words of love surrounding that space, I could look upon those before me in a new light. There was no hate in my heart and I was grateful.”

C. Love Bridges all

Kate Robertson, our friend and neighbor who shared her beautiful Hannah story with us last week, wrote a poem about reconciliation and redeeming of a relationship that had gone sour. She gave me permission to share a portion with you for today’s pondering:

Love doesn't care who
makes the first move,
who picks up the phone,
extends
the olive branch --
makes
the first call...

It doesn't matter to Love
who is the first to
reach out a hand in fellowship,
lay the beam that bridges our
polite distance.

Love doesn't know two sides
Love is *neither* side.
Love is not you, *or* me.
Love is what happens
on that bridge.

Love is only found
in the bridging, the spanning, the reaching,
the touching, the understanding
the tears of compassion,
mercy, acceptance.
I think it's time.
Yes, it's time.
don't you think it's time? our time.

Love is still the way!

D. Love *Can* Build a Bridge!

1. I'd gladly walk across the desert
With no shoes upon my feet
To share with you the last bite
Of bread I had to eat

I would swim out to save you
In your sea of broken dreams
When all your hopes are sinking
Let me show you what love means

Chorus:

Love can build a bridge
Between your heart and mine
Love can build a bridge
Don't you think it's time?
Don't you think it's time?

2. I would whisper love so loudly
Every heart could understand
That love and only love
Can join the tribes of man

I would give my heart's desire
So that you might see
The first step is to realize
That it all begins with you and me

Go out and serve Him—we end almost every Sunday with that song—what does it MEAN? Today? Now, in this current world? For a time such as this?

What is God's call to you now, **today**? Will you answer, "here I am, Lord," even when the people are hard to love? Even when loving means confronting hate and not staying silent?

Let us go in peace, to love and serve the Lord, Amen.