

**Yr. C, Epiphany 7**  
**February 20, 2022**  
**Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan**  
**St. Peter's Episcopal Church**  
**1381 Words**

**Lessons: Genesis 45:3-11**  
**Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42**  
**1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50**  
**Luke 6:27-38**

Let's be fair—Joseph was not an easy person to love. It didn't help that his daddy loved him more than his eleven brothers. But I think it was the way Joseph flaunted his special status that did him in. The spoiled, little 'dreamer boy' recounted more than once how he envisioned all of his older brothers bowing down to him.

Arrogant, rude, self-centered Joseph had it coming. You can read all about it in the novella about his dysfunctional family, beginning in chapter 37 of Genesis.

This story has more plot twists than anything you may be binge-watching right now. It might very well be racier, too. So, parents, do not leave your children and adolescents alone with their bibles. Read with them. *Blush with them.* Question and wonder about God.....*with them.*

It's a bit of a shame that we just heard the *spoiler* in our Old Testament lesson. We took a shortcut to find out how this twisted family saga turns out...how God's love ultimately conquered hate, how God's persistent goodness overwhelmed evil, and how God's life swallowed up death...*through Joseph.*

This—the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis—is *the* pre-eminent forgiveness and reconciliation chapter of the entire Old Testament. This is the quintessential Jewish story of how God delivered a struggling, broken family out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life.

The good news is this: If the power of God's goodness and mercy and love could transform insufferable Joseph and his big, messy family; then these gifts of God are powerful enough to transform *us*. We just have to open these gifts.....*and use them.*

Every bit of God's love which was poured into Joseph's heart, has also been poured into our hearts. Through Christ, we have been given the strength and courage to love our enemies, to do good to those who hate us, and to bless the people who curse us.

One of the beautiful things about this life is that we get to compose our own personal stories. We get to choose how to respond to the twists and turns in the plotline as it unfolds alongside our enemies as well as our friends, through all the curses as well as the blessings which come our way.

So, let me ask you...How much of *your story* is about *other* people? You know—the people who have done terrible things to your detriment, or the people who have owed you some type of debt, and never paid up. How much of *your story* is focused instead on your enemies—all the people who have *not given you* the gifts, attention, opportunities, or respect that you think you deserve? How much ink are you going to give to *those people* in *your story*—chapter-after-chapter of anger, frustration, and resentment...maybe even a little dollop of vengeance over here or a well-timed retaliation over there? None of that ever resolves the conflicts. They just drone on forever. It's not just sinful; *it's boring!*

You know, it's kind of like endlessly scrolling through the 'hate industrial complex'<sup>1</sup> of social media. Some billionaire's algorithm keeps presenting and *re-presenting* our 'culture of contempt'<sup>2</sup> right before your eyes.

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<sup>1</sup> A term used by David Isay, founder of *StoryCorps*.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

They know how powerfully seductive this is in keeping us focused on their advertising which stirs us up our eagerness to buy into the fear and greed which are *so easy to sell* to broken-hearted people.

African American poet, Robert Hayden, issued a warning *before* the internet existed. It continues to be a prophetic truth for the times we are living in. “We must not be frightened nor cajoled into accepting evil as deliverance from evil,” he wrote. “The *only way* to be free from evil is to reject evil. The idea of choosing the lesser evil never works. No matter how tempting it may seem, always choose good over evil.”

...like Joseph did when he *finally* recognized and followed God’s will. Joseph made a godly choice to love the brothers who tried to kill him. Joseph made the godly choice to save the brothers who sold him out. And he sealed his forgiveness of each one of them...with a kiss.

Joseph did not make the easy choice. He didn’t choose evil...or even some (so called) ‘*lesser evil.*’ No, Joseph chose to use every bit of God’s goodness and mercy. Joseph chose forgiveness. And by doing so, he turned a devastating family tragedy into a love story *for the ages*. No other ending to that story could have been as powerful, as transforming, or as interesting as this one.

One question: Why do you think *your story* would be any different? The most powerful, transformative, and interesting way to live *your story* is by using every bit of the goodness and mercy that God has also given to *you*.

It’s incredibly hard to do...which is why these kinds of stories are so rare...and, therefore, *beautiful*. If it was easy, everybody would be doing it.

Jesus understood all this, which is why he preached it so bluntly in this Gospel lesson. “Love your enemies,” he said. “If you only love those who love *you*, what credit is that?”

“Do. Good. Things. to the people who hate you,” Jesus said. “If you only do good to those who do good to you, what’s the big deal?”

“Be generous...with people who don’t deserve it,” Jesus preached. “If you only give to people from whom you expect something in return, then you’re just like everyone else. And there’s *no credit* in that.”

In the ancient world, there was an ethic of reciprocity. We call it the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” And Jesus recommends this ethic in verse 31...but only as a *starting point* because then he asks, repeatedly, “What credit do you really deserve if you *only* act reciprocally?”

And that is when Jesus ratchets up the standard for us...a lot. Jesus expects *his followers*—including you and me—to meet not only the human standard of reciprocity, but also the really, challenging divine standard of being kind to the *ungrateful*, and being merciful to people who just don’t deserve it.

If you need to start small, that’s okay...because it’s *practice* that makes perfect when it comes to forgiveness and reconciliation. It took Joseph a long time to discover his true nature, and to live up to it. But he did, and so can we....with God’s help.

There is a prayer which can help us practice opening Gods’ gift, and using every bit of God’s goodness in our lives as we try to compose our stories to become more powerful, transforming, and interesting. You know this prayer—it is the one Jesus taught us to pray.

See, he knew his standard would be extremely difficult for us to keep. And so Jesus taught his disciples (like us) to pray for help. Just like Joseph, we need God's help to deliver us from evil...and so we pray for our Father in heaven to save us from the times of trial as we attempt to write more love, forgiveness, and healing into our stories.

Just like Joseph, we also need God's encouragement to forgive undeserving people, and so Jesus very cleverly taught us to pray for a perpetual incentive. He taught us to ask God for *only* as much forgiveness as we are willing to give to those who trespass against us.

*Yes*—The Lord's Prayer can help us change the narrative of hatred and evil into beautiful stories about God's love...channeled right through us. With God's help, we have the power to be delivered from the endless cycles of evil, and to show and tell stories of goodness and mercy.

The Lord's Prayer—*our prayer*—encourages us to compose *better endings* to our life stories...endings that are powerful, transforming, and interesting. These are the kinds of stories that get retold again and again, because they are rare...and they are beautiful.

Yes, we have every bit of the power that Joseph had to flip the monotonous script of vengeance and retaliation. We just have to decide to open the gifts of God, and practice using them.

Amen.