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Ardmore, Pennsylvania  
Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany  
February 24, 2018

Lectionary Year C:  
Genesis 45:3-11, 15  
1 Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50  
Luke 6:27-38  
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42

*Reconciling the world*

Many years ago, there was a boy in elementary school who was learning to play the piano. He had learned pretty well for an average elementary school-age boy. He had gotten just beyond the basics though not yet to the advanced. But he had gotten a glimpse of the fact that his hands and musical sense were, theoretically, now capable of playing actual, grown-up, beautiful piano music.

He was theoretically capable, but not actually capable, not just yet. But he wanted to be. So he took advanced piano music—Beethoven, Chopin, and the like—and figured out how to play the deep, striking chord that concluded the piece. Not the chords at the end; just that last chord on which the piece concluded—the last notes of the last measure.

He said to anyone who would listen, “I can play the ending of some of Beethoven’s piano sonatas,” which would impress them, naturally, and he would drag them to the piano, stretch his hands out and, after some struggle, play the final chord. He would look at them triumphantly. They would look at him confused. They, of course, thought he meant that he was going to play the ending part, the last few lines, maybe, or the last movement, not just the final chord. But the final chord was all he had.

Our Old Testament reading this morning gives us the final chord of the Joseph story, a story that stretches out over thirteen long chapters in the book of Genesis. When most of us think of Genesis, we probably think of the story of creation, Adam and Eve, maybe Noah. But there is far more written about Joseph, by orders of magnitude, than any other person in Genesis.

It is too much to read the entire Joseph cycle in one church service, certainly. It’s even too much to summarize, though if I was more like John Chrysostom and his three-hour sermons, I might give it a shot.

But today’s last verse, chapter 45, verse 15, is the final, majestic, Beethovenian last chord that ends the epic sonata about Joseph. It reads, “And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.” There had been rivalry between them, jealousy, abandonment, deceit, even attempted murder. And there, with the tables turned, in the foreign land of Egypt, Joseph kissed them, and wept upon them, and they were reconciled.

The Joseph that his brothers beheld was a stranger to them in a strange land. A Hebrew by birth, he had by necessity adopted the ways of the Egyptians instead, swearing by the life of Pharaoh, not wearing the customary beard, speaking Egyptian and pretending not to understand Hebrew. At the beginning of today’s passage, however, he reveals himself to them. “Joseph said to his brothers, ‘I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?’” And they were dismayed.

As they should have been. It was he that they had abandoned; he they were jealous of; he that they tried to kill. And in the course of Chapter 45, Joseph forgives his brothers. He even recounts their story together in providential terms: what they intended for evil—like killing him—

God had used for good. Their attempt on his life led him to being in Egypt, which meant that this family of the Hebrews would survive the famine, which they might not have otherwise; it meant that the bond of the children of Jacob was deepened immeasurably, perhaps keeping them unified during the years to come; though Joseph didn't know it, it was also the event that established the Israelites in Egypt, from which they would be liberated by the mighty act of God known as the Exodus, some years later.

But all of these good things came about because Joseph forgave his brothers. By God's grace, certainly, and not without some inner turmoil. But, given the opportunity to drop the hammer on those who had betrayed him, he let it pass. Given the chance to gloat in victory, he let it go. To make them pay was within his power, and he didn't. They say that revenge is a dish best served cold, and there it was, laid out for him and ready for the eating.

And Joseph forgave his brothers. It's basically a miracle.

In a moment we will welcome Madeleine and Marciano into the family of the children of God. The New Covenant, instituted by Christ, establishes the possibility of adoption into God's family, and baptism is the adoption ceremony. After their baptism, they join with all the baptized as full members of our community, called the Church.

This also means that all the baptized, Madeleine and Marciano soon to be included, are brothers and sisters with Christ and one another. Not acquaintances or colleagues, though not best friends, either: Jesus says we should love each other, not like each other. (You have no obligation to like the person sitting in the pew with you.) All the baptized are brothers and sisters, because we have Jesus as our elder brother in common.

And the one thing that the New Testament bangs on about, over and over again, is the requirement of Christian forgiveness. In today's gospel from Luke, Jesus continues his series of ethical teachings, and concludes with the injunction to forgive. In the gospel of Matthew, when Jesus teaches the disciples how to pray, he says, "Pray like this, Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name..." etc. Then he finishes the prayer, and the very next thing he says is, "For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:14-15). When Jesus teaches people to pray, he also teaches them to forgive.

There is something special about forgiveness in the Christian ethical landscape; there is something of particular importance about it. When Jesus prays, from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34), he is showing us the limit case: the innocent man forgiving the guilty ones of their injustice—of their murder. He is showing us one of the things that his whole life was about: the forgiveness of sins.

I suppose he is showing us one of the things that our whole lives should be about, too, difficult though it may be. So that when the final chord of our lives is played, and the last note sounds, what is heard is harmony, and it can be said about us what we say about Joseph: that, in spite of everything, we forgave our brothers, and our sisters—even if it was basically a miracle.