

Matthew 14:22-33
August 16, 2020 sermon
"The Healing Flood"
Randy Smith

The main reason for this morning's sermon is **the tears**.

You'll notice that, throughout the Scripture reading for today, there are **a lot of tears**. And not just *tears*, but **weeping** -- a *flood* of **uncontrollable** tears -- and **wailing** -- *loud* tears, audible through the door and into the hallway. And **physical** tears -- tears that make your *legs weak*, and incline you just to **collapse** onto the shoulders of those around you.

When I read through the lessons for the 11th Sunday after Pentecost, all those tears made a real *impact* on me. I have to think they are the kind of tears we are *all* acquainted with to one degree or another, tears that are the **outward** sign of something stirring **inside** of us -- *powerful* emotions coming out of us, feelings *so* powerful we cannot begin to *hold them in*, even if we wanted to, feelings which **overwhelm** us, almost to the point of **disabling** us. We generally *strive*, of course, to keep these feelings **dammed up** inside of us, such that when something happens to *breach* that "dam", the tears burst through in **torrents**.

The reading from Gen. 45 is, of course, the **dramatic climax** of a long, *twisting* tale which begins back in c. 37. It is surely one of the most **familiar** stories in the Bible -- so much so that a young Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice used it as the basis for their first work ever to become a public performance, *Joseph & the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, in 1968. It's the story of the severely **dysfunctional** family life of possibly the most **colorful** Patriarch of Biblical Israel, **Jacob**, and his 12 sons. The *cause* of the dysfunctionality in the family is as old as families themselves: a parent's blatant **favoritism**, his favorite son finding it irresistible to **rub** his brothers' *noses* in that favoritism, to the point where they become **homicidal** towards him. Only a last-minute pang of conscience on the part of his brother (really, stepbrother) Judah saves Joseph from certain death.

His alternative fate -- being sold into slavery by his brothers -- likely felt to Joseph *at first* like a fate **worse** than death. Over the ensuing years, however, Joseph uses his *wits*, and what was apparently a *special talent* for interpreting dreams, to rise from a **slave** in Pharaoh's Egypt to Pharaoh's "**No. 2**" **man**, in charge of Egypt's vast food stores. He comes to this powerful position *at the very time* that **famine** strikes his *hometown*, compelling his father, Jacob to send his Joseph's brothers down to Egypt to buy grain. Naturally, they are directed to meet with their brother, who recognizes who **they** are. But **they** do not recognize **him** -- which ratchets up the dramatic tension even higher!

Suddenly, the huge question hanging over all their interactions which follow is **what Joseph will do** in regard to his brothers. Holding the position he now holds -- and having, in effect, the **element of surprise** on his side -- there is *no limit* to the kind of **retribution** he could bring down on their heads. Joseph *does* spend a little while -- as big cats do -- "**toying**" with his "prey". But *resolution* of the dramatic tension comes -- finally -- in the scene which unfolds in the reading from c. 45 this morning, the opening sentence of which is, "**Then** Joseph could **no longer control himself** before all those who stood by him..."

Why? Because the **intensity**, and **magnitude** of the feelings -- the **amazement** and **joy** of seeing his brothers after so many years, the **love** for his brothers, *still* there inside of him, *despite* all that they had caused him to suffer -- it just couldn't be kept *pent up* any longer. The "**dam**" -- which had been holding so much in for so long, but which had been **weakening** ever since the

brothers came to Egypt the first time back in c. 42 -- now **broke**, and the feelings came *flooding* out, in **tears**. Such that by the end of the scene it's hard to tell who has been *more* greatly **relieved** -- Joseph or his brothers -- of the great emotional burdens they had been carrying, *one* the burden of the **victimizer's guilt**, the *other* of the burden of the **victim's** "natural" desire for **revenge**.

That's how it is *always* is, by the way, with **reconciliation**: **both** parties discover just how much **each** needed to **be** reconciled.

But -- importantly -- this is not just an **emotional** release. There is **more than psychology** at work here. There is **a profound -- and unexpected**, and at first *difficult* to **comprehend** -- **theology** at the **foundation** of it all. Immediately upon revealing his true identity to his brothers, Joseph -- seeing that his brothers were "dismayed" (Heb. *bahal*; "terrified" [NIV]) -- calls them to come closer, and begins to tell them, in effect, **why** they ought **not** be "terrified". Sure, they *victimised* him. Horribly. And, by their malicious deceit, claiming Joseph had been killed by a wild animal, they **broke their father's heart**. At every step, they were **wrong**, and they **wronged others**, in ways *entirely* **contrary** to anything God could *possibly* be said to have wished or willed.

But **God**, Joseph tells them -- because *he* can **now see** this -- has gathered up all of the **broken pieces of relationship, and of life**, which you, and I, and our father have been living -- for **years** now -- in the *midst* of, and fashioned those broken piece into something **good**: Joseph will be able to see to it that his family survives the famine. But the **impact** of Joseph's moving the direction of **reconciliation** is much, *much* larger than that *immediate* benefit.

His father, Jacob, is, remember -- through **his** father Isaac, and through **his** father, Abraham -- the bearer of the **Covenant promise** of God, to make of Abraham's offspring an altogether **new family** in the life of the world, a family capable of living **in conformity to** what God wishes and wills for *all* the families of the earth, and so capable of **being**, and **bringing** a blessing to **all** the families of the earth (Gen. 12:1-3). Joseph *being* where Joseph *was*, and *choosing* to *do* what Joseph *chooses* to *do*, becomes a critical link in the chain which keeps the Covenant **promise** alive by keeping the Covenant **People** -- who will in coming generations, post their Exodus from Egypt, become a nation -- **alive**. It is Joseph's capacity to move toward **reconciliation** and **not revenge** which makes all of this possible, that makes **a new beginning** possible, a **future** which is not just **a continual replaying** of the past.

The story doesn't celebrate the *greatness* of Joseph's character, however, but rather the **wondrous** character of our God, who is **continually moving toward us in reconciliation**, and working to train our hearts and lives in that same **healing art**. Here on vivid display, i.e., is **the gospel in the OT**, viz., God revealed as the One who -- contrary to **our** *intensely* stubborn human habit of "**moral bookkeeping**", viz., keeping **ledgers** of *who* has *wronged* us, and to what *degree* -- does **not** keep accounts. Cf. Paul's proclamation of the gospel, and definition of his mission, in 2 Cor. 5:18-19:

that is, in Christ God was **reconciling** the world to himself, **not counting their trespasses against them**, and entrusting the message of **reconciliation** to *us*.

Somehow, *long* before the time of Jesus, Joseph heard and responded to the gospel, and somehow found the -- what might we call it? **Theological courage**? -- to **surrender** control of his life -- the control we exercise when we engage in our "moral bookkeeping" -- and understand his life *instead* as being -- finally -- in God's hands, as being, i.e., **usable** by God as a part of the **larger purposes** of God -- even as **imperceptible** as they were throughout most of his life.

Is it possible, do you think, for **us** to make this same sort of **surrender**?

But, what about those **tears** which motivated this sermon in the first place?

There is such *intensity* and *magnitude* of feeling we are all carrying around inside of us, in **deep reservoirs** which we are likely not even consciously aware of until -- as in the case of Joseph coming face to face with his brothers -- something happens. There are **griefs** -- *many* kinds of *losses* from which we've yet to really heal. There are people in our lives who have *died*, who we nonetheless still need to be reconciled with. There are so many *kinds* of **brokenness** in our relationships with others -- especially between spouses, siblings, and parents and children -- so many **feelings** in need of being *expressed*, so many **things** in *need* of being **said** between us and others -- which have been left **unsaid** *for so long* -- that it just seems *impossible* they ever could be. How *is it* that we ever get our lives and relationships so tied up in such amazingly difficult knots?

And then, when we can come to that moment of reconciliation -- as *frightening* as the path is that we may have to take to arrive there -- what happens? A *flood* of tears. A **healing flood**. It's enough to make you think that *the truth* is that we human beings were *meant* for a life much *fuller*, much more *at peace*, much more *reconciled* to one another, than the lives we, *most* of us, end up *living* day by day.

Is it possible, do you think -- in our life-together as the Church -- for us to be a people who are **skilled practitioners** of the *healing art of reconciliation*? Can we learn together from the God who *does not keep accounts* how *not to keep accounts* with one another? Can we help one another to see our lives **truthfully** -- that we are, *each* of us, **both** the **injured** *and* -- in ways often **very difficult** to acknowledge -- the *injurer* -- as the only doorway through which reconciliation awaits?

Cf. post-apartheid South Africa "**Truth & Reconciliation Commission**" (1997): public confession, and public forgiveness, because there is no reconciliation without truth. "The gold standard for how a divided society with a violent past might work through that past and move forward."

And then, having acquired this skill, make what Paul in 2 Cor. 5 calls the "ministry of reconciliation" *our* principle form of ministry, in *our* divided society with a violent past" -- the violence of racism, sexual discrimination, socioeconomic exploitation -- and so help our society "work through that past and move forward"?