



A Crack of Mercy

February 24, 2019

Seventh Sunday after Epiphany

Genesis 45:1-15; Luke 6:27-38

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Kerry Egan will be with us in two weeks for the McShane Colloquium. As a hospice chaplain she hears lots of family stories. In her book *On Living*, she recalls many loving ones. And she says, *monstrous* things happen in families—beatings, rapes, rages. Feeling utterly unwanted, abandoned. Or being the one who failed to care. When love is imperfect, or a family is destructive, something else can be learned: forgiveness.¹ She might have been writing about Joseph. Here's the backstory to our next reading.

Joseph grows up as daddy's privileged favorite. He's spoiled with designer clothes, no Home Depot fashion or hand-me-downs. His tattling and slacking deepen his brothers' envy and hate. They can't speak peaceably to him, the Bible says. Then Joseph dreams a little dream. Now, in scripture dreams are like divine plans. Still Joseph proves as wise in human relations as a toad. He says, "Hey, guys, guess what?! I dreamed one day you'll all bow down to me, even the sun, moon and stars will, too." His father stays silent, complicit.

That's when his brothers decide: enough! They're in fields, tending to family shepherding business. They see Joseph coming, probably strutting, flaunting his fancy coat. They decide to kill. They rip off his coat. They throw him in a deep pit and break for lunch. A camel caravan appears on the horizon. They think: Hey, better yet, we could profit from a little human trafficking. That's how Joseph ends up in Egypt. As dead to his brothers as the goat they slaughter to blood-soak his

fancy coat. With barely disguised spite they give it to their father, who wails in grief.

Joseph lives a Cinderella soap opera. He rises through slavery to run his master's house/business. Then intrigue with the master's wife lands him in Pharaoh's prison. Two poor unfortunate servants who displease Pharaoh get thrown in with him. They dream. Joseph interprets. Fickle Pharaoh changes his mind, and plays a royal get out of jail free card. Then Pharaoh dreams and asks that servant to interpret. He punts to a guy he met in prison. That's how Joseph gets to be Pharaoh's right-hand-man.

Famine strikes the whole Middle East. Joseph's brothers come to Egypt seeking humanitarian relief. They bow to him—dream come true. Joseph gives aid ... with manipulating twists on family dysfunction that persists. Joseph frames for theft his youngest brother Benjamin—now daddy's favorite. Tension rises. His brothers despair. If we don't return with Benjamin, they say, it'll kill our father. All this time, they have no clue they talk with the one as good as dead to them.

{Read Genesis 45:1-15}

Brothers by birth, they became enemies. Face to face in a royal palace, a wall stood between. A wall of envy and insensitivity built through privilege. A wall of bitterness and vengeance built through hurts not let go. A wall of anger, mistrust, fear, built over years of broken relationship, ensuing resentment and ignorance of one another, and unresolved conflict. Beyond one family story, what makes the Bible true is that we find it's a story of humanity—of me and you. Of our families, our society, our country and world on the widest scale, not unlike bonds of life and love into which we're born.

Truth is, friends, conflicts arise every day—different experiences, perspectives, expectations. It's good and right to define who we are, in part be what we're not.

Anger can even be good in life—to raise attention, to bring clarity, to catalyze action. We need disputes about immigration, climate change, gender, #metoo or #blacklivesmatter, school funding, affordable housing, nuclear weapons, and what was said last time we saw family. Difficult discourse engaged faithfully, lovingly ... lest we fracture into enemies, dehumanizing others, building walls in the heart.

Loving enemies is a nice thought, sentimentally appealing. I've known that love among friends. A German, who I'd have been shooting to kill just decades earlier. And Russians, who a few years before we met were said to be the "Great Satan." Surely, we've all known erstwhile enemies in person or in principle with whom we've given and received love, like Palestinian Muslims and Israeli Jews on our recent pilgrimage. Love your enemies. Thanks Jesus. Nice idea. And I want God's dream to become true—all walls come down so all people flourish as one community.

Still don't we know that's hard. Joseph and his brothers were enemies for decades. So long, so distorted in heart, they didn't recognize Joseph right there before them. Friends, it's hard to love enemies, if there's no relationship to begin with. And in that void, every cutting remark, even intended expressions of love, can cause even worse reaction. Another brick in the wall.

Brothers became bitter enemies, face to face in a royal palace, a wall between them. Then Joseph could control his desire for healing and peace no longer. No more bricks, a crack appears. He reveals who he is. Come closer, he tells his brothers, through their fear, guilt, dismay. Closer, across the royal barrier separating them as much as the emotional one. He recounts their common story. He names wrong done—sold into slavery. No scolding, blaming, shaming. He's grown in humility (thanks be to God!).

Rising above royal power and any impulse for more punishment, he shows weakness, vulnerability. He offers forgiveness in practical form—help in their need. It's salvation. Joseph kissed his brothers and wept upon them. It's not yet full reconciliation. They begin to talk. It's a crack in the wall growing wider. It bears promise of resurrection, new life flourishing in God's grace.

Here's good news that ancient people like us who wrote the Bible try to get us to believe. More than a moving story about one family long ago, in God's grace, we can share this hope of new life, too. More than *destructive* power of unchecked fear and unchanneled anger, trust *creative* power of God's love to heal, guide, inspire. As Joseph says: God sent me, God made me, worked through me, God turned what was evil into good for all. In God's grace, cracks of mercy appear.

Grace—let's pause a moment to get our minds around words we use. Grace is a gift of life beyond what we earn or deserve. Mercy makes grace real when there is hurt or offense or suffering and could rather be vengeance. Mercy is not ignorance or denial. Mercy faces wrong, trying to find a way to forgiveness. When we shared communion at Wyndham this week, Jesus' call to mercy made her want to talk about someone she knows. Hard life, another poor choice—abusive, consequences to face. How can there be a way to nurture another chance, she yearned, to keep a wall from being built; maybe a prison wall.

Friends, as we try to live love in times like that, see that mercy is not *passivity*, allowing abuse to continue. Mercy has three steps of *activity*. In mercy, we *name* wrong done, like we confess each week. We *inhibit* harm from continuing. Then turning to the Lord, giver of mercy, we *nurture* new abundant life in love. We trust that God, who raised Jesus, frees us to love with courage in a broken, fearful world. Name wrong. Inhibit harm. Nurture life. You see, if we name, inhibit and stop,

that's how walls get built. When we go the next step to nurture flourishing life, that's the fullness of mercy—that's how cracks in walls appear.

Jesus tries to get us to do what Joseph did with his brothers. One author notes that often Josephs of our world use power gained to pay back those who wronged them. The nerd in a bad comedy wins the day and then embarrasses the prom king who made sport of him. After election day, victorious candidates reward supporters and punish opponents. And Jesus asks: If we just love those who love us, or help or lend to those who do the same, what difference for good is that really in the end? Cycles of retaliation must be broken. Fear and mistrust must be released. Anger must be channeled toward aid.

“Be merciful, as God is merciful,” Jesus urges. According to Luke, that's the heart of this whole passage. Jesus riffs on a text from Leviticus that says: “Be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy.” Matthew has Jesus say: “Be perfect as God is perfect.” Because Matthew's vision is that Jesus fulfills the law perfectly. Luke assumes it's impossible to be perfect. We make poor decisions and face hard consequences. Even the “best” families have broken relationships. So we must be merciful as God is merciful. Friends, be merciful by giving hearts to the hope that Divine Goodness is stronger than evil; Holy Love stronger hate.

I believe that is the power of resurrection Joseph lived. When I read the news, listen to you, and think about my life, I believe that's about the only real cause for hope amid the sadness. Still, I have to admit Jesus makes me uncomfortable here. Because I know I have work to do. Uncomfortable ... because we must be careful about how his words get interpreted.

Turn the other cheek, give your shirt also. Jesus isn't naively sending another victim to Harvey Weinstein, R. Kelly, or a church priest. He's not saying: “Right, Maduro

walled out humanitarian aid. We'll just go home, then." No, Jesus tries to love victims until they're empowered not to be victims anymore. To be defined not by what's done to them, but by choice to confront abuse, to crack a wall. Turn the cheek and take the moral high road. Give your shirt also and shame abuse with superior goodness. Like marching across the Edmund Pettus bridge knowing what might await. Like an anonymous Chinese man dressed like everyone else standing in front of a line of tanks heading for Tiananmen Square. Like Rachel Corrie, an American working for peace in Palestine, standing in front of a huge Israeli bulldozer knowing the risk to her life. Like Jesus giving his life to God's way of love so deeply, completely, even for Roman and religious leaders who thought they were his enemies and nailed him on a cross.

Be merciful as God is merciful. Trying to come up with a sermon title, I thought about "angels of mercy." But then, you may know what the term often means. Sure enough, first person I tested it with ... "aren't they people who kill others?" Yup ... that'd be about the opposite of what God wants. Still I love that image Banksy painted on the Israeli wall in Bethlehem, which we walked beside for about a half mile or so. Angels, messengers of God, trying to make the crack in concrete slabs a bit bigger. So many walls in our world, in our families where children can hold such different beliefs than their parents. So many walls between us, sometimes even in our church family.

Our Methodist kin in Christ are meeting now to discuss gay marriage and ordination. Pope Francis just ended a worldwide conference of bishops to address sex abuse scandals. I'm reminded we Presbyterians aren't perfect either. Our leaders commit misconduct and abuse. Walls have fractured our church into factions. Still, I trust the way we address conflicts, when at our best. Nearly 20 years ago, our General Assembly formed a task force to engage questions of human sexuality. Twenty ordinary people were intentionally equitably chosen to represent opposing

and various views. They met over a weekend, every few months, praying, worshiping, studying scripture, listening to one another ... for six years. In the end, enemies became friends. Recommended action was unanimous. All because first, they affirmed others' humanity, loved by God, and faithful intention in various positions. Just maybe they were angels like in Banksy graffiti on a Bethlehem wall, looking for a crack trying to open it a little further in God's mercy.

Friends, we're not here today to blithely, naively assert all walls will quickly come down. I still feel hurts in my heart. As you tell me you do. We know humans naturally incline toward matching hurt for hurt. Today we're just looking for cracks in our walls to make a little bigger.

God calls us to rise above pettiness and vengeance to serve like Christ; to win over opponents with grace and kindness. God calls us to choose relationships over ideologies, as a friend and colleague said this week. Relationships over ideologies—that's good. God calls us to find a way for people who've done monstrous wrongs; whether it was a felony, lying incessantly, black face paint, or assault—people in these pews, people like me and you ... God wants us all to name it, inhibit more harm, and be truly released, nurtured, rising to make creative contributions for society. Maybe, even to the right-hand of Pharaoh?

Dear friends, if others start laying bricks, or huge concrete slabs, start looking for cracks! Your reward will be great, Jesus says. True freedom of heart and mind and spirit, empowered with resurrection life! Relationship with God and others in holy love and hope and joy and peace. Unencumbered with guilt, no longer confined by anger, fear, bitterness. And just maybe we'll grow wings, grab a crowbar, bandana and knit cap, and find a crack in the wall.

Thanks be to God, the giver of mercy. Amen.

ⁱ Kerry Egan, *On Living* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2016), 29-30.