

“Come Closer”
Genesis 45:1-15
11th Sunday after Pentecost

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Westminster, Greenville
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The Franciscan priest Richard Rohr has written:

“All great spirituality is about what we do with our pain.”¹

This is, in my mind, a FASCINATING statement.
Not what we do with our gifts,
not what we do with our money,
not how much we give to our work, our families, our
church...

No.
Spirituality, according to Richard Rohr, is first and foremost about
what we do with our pain.

Do you think Rohr is right?

Consider Joseph.
Consider what Joseph did with his pain long ago.

Today’s text is the end of a larger, wonderful story in the book of
Genesis, one of my favorites in all of scripture.

You’ll recall that when Joseph was much younger, he was—to put
it mildly—an irritating little brother.

He has two dreams in which his older brothers bow down to him.

¹ Found at http://www.azquotes.com/author/18308-Richard_Rohr.

And like an IDIOT, he tells his 10 older brothers about these two dreams.

He's the apple of his father's eye.
So the older brothers—they're done with him.

They sell Joseph to Ishmaelites, who in turn sell him to Pharaoh in Egypt, while Joseph's older siblings try to cover their tracks. They present their father Jacob with Joseph's robe, now dipped in goat's blood, to make it look like their brother was killed by a wild animal.

And Jacob is devastated.
And years go by.

And Joseph goes from being a slave in Egypt to interpreting Pharaoh's dreams in Egypt to becoming second-in-command to Pharaoh in Egypt.

Then a famine hits all the land.
Egypt has bread because of Joseph's leadership.
And his brothers go to Egypt to find grain.

Where they meet Joseph, and they do not recognize Joseph.
But Joseph recognizes them!

If you were in Joseph's shoes, what would you say to your brothers, what would you do to your brothers?

“All great spirituality,” writes Rohr, “is about what we do with our pain.”

It seems to me that Rohr could have been speaking to our own lives right now.

I think it's safe to say that most of us have lost patience with the pandemic. We wish we could control this and that in our lives right now, and we cannot control this or that in our lives right now.

It's challenging to reconcile ourselves with new realities.
It's difficult to come to terms with that which we cannot control.

Let me also assure you that I realize, and our entire staff realizes, that there is a great challenge before us right now as a church...all of us yearn to be together.

The staff has been working throughout the summer, and meeting with our Covid-19 Task Force and Session on a weekly basis this summer, working on our plans for how we can connect with one another in the fall. Within the next week or two, you'll hear more about what the fall might look like here at Westminster.

Because the challenge before us is clear.
It looks like the virus will be with us for a while.

How do we be church, when we have to REIMAGINE ways to be the church?

How do we stay connected, when we have to reimagine the ways that we can be connected?

It's a challenge that leads me back to Joseph.
Joseph is a fascinating character to consider for this moment.

How did Joseph come to terms with what HE could not control?

How did he come to REIMAGINE his life, after what his brothers did to him?

- When he finally sees his brothers again, Joseph does not put them in an Egyptian prison, in order to exact his own revenge.
- And he does not IGNORE them, pretending not to recognize them, sending them away empty-handed.

In our text for today, Joseph does something remarkable.

Instead of putting distance between his present life and his broken, dysfunctional family, instead of putting distance between his new life and the pain of his old life, he says to his brothers, “Come closer.”

He reveals to his brothers who he is...

And he says this:

“And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

Do you see what’s happening here?

Joseph has reimagined who God wants him to be.

Not the apple of his father’s eye, receiving fancy robes from his father. Not the victim of a terrible act by his siblings.

But the person who can help his family, help his brothers, and his people the most.

Even with the difficulties Joseph experienced in his life, he did not respond as a vengeful person or a bitter person.

Joseph responded as a SENT person.

Sent by God to preserve life.

Sent by God to create NEW LIFE.

Sent by God to be a beacon of God's grace for his family.

Joseph did not realize it as it was happening, but God was turning Joseph's pain into new possibilities...possibilities not just for Joseph, but for the very people who excluded him, and sold him away.

It's a good model for all of us.

What if we too saw ourselves as SENT people at this moment?

This moment when things are not normal with the school year.

This moment when things do not feel like they've always felt with church.

This moment when things are not always predictable,
when many of us feel like we've hit a wall?

As you may have figured out by now, Tom Long is one of my favorite storytellers. Tom Long tells of the time when he was a seminary student.

He was doing an internship at a church, providing pastoral care to families. One of the families was quite large,
and their youngest child, Robert,
had cerebral palsy.

Whenever Long visited the family, the family would often be gathered together in a large group,
at the dinner table or in the den,

laughing and telling stories...except for Robert.

Robert was always on the outside, watching the others.

One day when Long visited, it was just the mom at home with Robert.

After some small talk, she mentioned something that had happened a few days before.

Mom had been sitting in the family room in the late afternoon,
and Robert was standing in the darkness down the hall,
watching from a distance.

Mom felt what she described as a “strange shift in the room,” something that caused her to look up from her knitting and down the hallway toward Robert.

She said: “I saw Jesus with his arm around Robert’s shoulder.”

She looked away, looked again, and there was only Robert.

Long goes on to say that he doesn’t know to this day what to make of it. But he does know that he and this mother reacted in *two completely different ways*.

As a seminary student, he decided to psychoanalyze the event, thinking to himself:

“Mom feels so guilty about her child, she has projected her [perceived] failings through the symbol system of the Christian faith.”

But that Mom took that vision of Jesus seriously.

She turned her vision into ETHICS.

Because of that moment, she got to work in the community and started several programs for children who are physically challenged.²

Now what if she had just written off that experience?
 What if she had been paralyzed by her own pain?
 What if she had never seen herself as a SENT PERSON?

It's easy to see ourselves as sent by God when we've got the wind at our back, when there's smooth sailing ahead, when life is going just the way we thought it would go...

It's harder to see ourselves as sent by God when we're in a storm.
 When we don't know which way the wind will blow tomorrow.

And yet, when you look at the Bible, God is always sending people at less than ideal moments.

Do you remember that story in John's Gospel, when it's Easter evening, and the disciples are in a room together, doors locked, huddled in FEAR, afraid that they might be found?

The risen Christ comes to them.
 And Jesus says:

“As the Father has sent me, so I send you.”

In the midst of great FEAR...the first disciples were sent.

² As told by Thomas G. Long in his book *Preaching from Memory to Hope*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

Do you recall, in the book of Acts, the disciple named Ananias?

How God came to him in a vision.
And Ananias said, “Here I am!”

And God told Ananias to go a street called Straight, find a man named Saul, and lay hands on him so that he might receive his sight.

And Ananias replies, “Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done...”

But God said to Ananias: “Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings...”

And Ananias went.
And Saul received his sight back.
And Saul became Paul, the greatest missionary that God’s Church has ever known.

God might send us to reconcile with our enemies? Yes...
God might send us to people we have difficulty loving? Yes.
God sends us to those people too.

Back when we lived in Texas, I was at a Presbytery meeting, a meeting that started to drag on and on and on...when a minister named Marshall spoke. He was reporting on a trip that he took to Egypt the previous fall with the General Presbyter of the Presbytery.

It so happened that in Egypt at that time, there were a number of churches that had been burned and looted.

The two of them took a four-hour drive through the desert to visit those churches. They saw a pile of books, a pile of Bibles—burned. They saw sanctuaries that used to hold hundreds of people—destroyed.

Marshall had never been to these churches before, but he said he was angry. He, who was not even there when it happened, wanted to find a way to even the score.

Then they went to meet with the clergy of these churches.
And what they said to Marshall astounded him.
They did not speak of getting back at the people who perpetrated the crimes.

And they did not talk much of rebuilding, although they made it clear that they would.

They spoke about reconciliation and peace.
They spoke about forgiveness.
They spoke about the necessity of forgiving those who had done these things to them.

They spoke as a people who knew what their job was, even when their future was uncertain.

They spoke as a people who knew that they were SENT....sent by God to be emissaries of God's peace and reconciliation and love.

In the midst of this particular time, have you considered what God is sending you to do?

I brought a list of names with me today.
It's on this sheet of paper.
I've listed all the names of people in this church who are not sent by God.

We've got over 1800 members here, it took a while to go through all the names.

But I came up with a list.

The "NOT SENT BY GOD to embody the grace and love and kindness of Jesus Christ during a once-in-a-hundred-year-pandemic LIST."

I know...you're squinting.

You think there's something wrong with the camera.

All you see is a blank piece of paper.

Let me assure you, your eyesight is just fine.

Amen.