

Genuine Repentance?
 Sermon for 4 October 2020
 Texts: Gen. 43:26-34 & 44:6-16
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In reviewing this sermon Saturday morning, I realized that I should probably start with what I conclude with. Here it is: first, it is forgiveness that teaches us about sin. That is Christ's approach to us. As those who are forgiven, we are freed, we no longer need to deny, suppress, or repress sin. Indeed, we can, because we are forgiven stop fighting it! The world advises us to dismiss, forget, ignore . . . sedate, or seek therapy for sin. We don't need an escape from sin, of the feelings associate with it, what we need is forgiveness. Thanks be to God we have that in Christ Jesus! Second, when the Holy Spirit brings conviction of sin, after the shock of it makes us aware of it, we need to move beyond the usual guilt and shame of it, by rejoicing. Yes, rejoice in our condition of sin because it is proof of God's enduring concern for the state of our souls. One of the enormous insights of the method of Methodism, is their direction to ask one another: "How is it with your soul?" or "Is it well with your soul?" and then, to provide, in their classes a safe place to answer, respond and to deal with the spiritual inquiry made into our lives, into matters of the heart. The conviction of the Holy Spirit is one of God's tools to motivate us, and to cause us too ponder the well-being of our souls. So, is it well with your soul?

See, when Joseph's eleven brothers come as guests of honor to the governor's mansion, this question is asked, "Is it well with your souls?" That's the substance of Joseph's inquiry into their well-being. Is it possible to read this engagement more superficially? Of course it is. But if we do I think we miss out on why this business is in the Book. We are poorly positioned, apart from this, to grasp the "tests" that Joseph has in mind to assess their spiritual standing with God. Are they genuinely repentant?

Spoiler alert: yes, they are. We have three grounds of evidence to bring us to ash conclusion: 1. the lack of envy and the banquet table; 2. the brothers' response to the alleged theft of Joseph's silver cup; and 3. the testimony of Judah's transformed character in the interactions with Joseph that follow their return to face the music. I pray that knowing the outcome will not diminish your interest in how I arrives at these conclusion.

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They say the proof of the pudding is in the tasting. So we have in Gen. 43 the eleven brothers (twelve, if you count their host) in the banqueting hall of Joseph's Egyptian residence. And, it seems, there are three segregated tables: one for the Egyptians, one for the Hebrews, and, possible separate seating for Joseph—this, or some such arrangement, was seating as "usual" because these ethnic divisions

prevented dining together¹. And, at the Hebrew's table, unbeknownst to them, a family reunion is unfolding—Joseph as not yet revealed his identity to his brothers. And this meal **is the first of two tests: both aimed at discovering whether the brothers are honest men**—do they have self-awareness, consciences and personal integrity. Have they learned anything over the intervening years about their sin, their treachery, and their deception if so, if they are now **honest men**, we may infer that repentance has occurred and that the fruit of their repentance is evident. Well, is it? There are two chief tests applied by Joseph: envy and compassion.

If we take the eagle's eye view, the long view, we could consider: how is God doing in shaping this family into **the blessing to every nation** as promised to Abraham? How is the elevation of Joseph related to this transformation? I think that there are two discernible stages, stages which occupy four to five hundred years. Joseph plays a critical role in the first hundred years, or so, stage one: Joseph has appeared on the scene in order to disciple, rule, or govern the unruly! *The crisis of worldwide famine supplies the pressure and heat*. But Jacob's family's besetting sins (rooted in envy, self-serving, hatred, dishonor, faithless insecurity and fear), issuing in the sins of lust, greed and idolatry will take centuries to purge, *centuries* of sorrow, suffering of injustice and oppression. **Lust, greed and idolatry (as well as their root causes: hatred, fear and envy) can form bondages which then have to be identified and broken²!** Are we valiant, "good men and true?" Can we up our faithfulness? Yes.

When the people of God *are enslaved*, like inmates in jail, or prison, it may be *because God is schooling them in injustice*, through a literal bondage sent to foster a longing for liberty in them which longing, coupled with a passion for justice³, will make them useful in the coming kingdom, the kingdom of God which arrives later, in the person of Jesus Christ in the fullness of time. So, the schooling, and discipline come first and then emancipation to free worship and spiritual liberty: **Let my people go** was coupled with **that they may worship me**. Exodus 3:18 reads: **The Lord, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us; and now, please let us go three days' journey into the wilderness that we may sacrifice to the Lord our God**. Political and social emancipation was subordinate to worship—still is. Both stages will incorporate testing, direction, guidance and refining!

¹ Ethnic divisions, and segregated dining runs contrary to our cultural values of inclusion and acceptance of differences. However, these social barriers do have the effect of suppressing intermarriage (a positive good for God's people who are instructed to not marry pagans, or unbelievers). And the suppression of intermarriage works against assimilation whereby one's distinctive culture is diminished—whereby one's family values and traditions get watered down. The challenge remains, staying Christian requires much effort and diligence.

² The bondage distorts the fundamental character of a person. God does not want us fearful, or greedy or self-serving. He wants us free—free to worship and free to be whomever he created us to be. Are we in the shape, or condition that God would have us in? If not, what are the steps we need to take to remedy our situation?

³ As shared last week, justice comes by faith in God *as a gift*. It is a divine work which cannot be imposed through social order by legislature, laws, policing. Yes, it is a goal, and yes it is a worthy aspiration but, and this is a reminder, it is a piece of the moral order, under divine authority and administered by the King of kings.

The first test of Joseph relates to envy: are the brothers resentful and envious (or jealous) of each other?—particularly of Benjamin? (Who, by the way, was just as favored as Joseph had been—favoritism was a constant.) At the banquet, Benjamin is laden with portions five-times the size of his ten other brothers. Nothing. We read: **They drank and were merry with him**, with Joseph. There is no indication of the envy that drove the ten to resent Rachel's sons and hate their father Jacob—to the point of attempted murder. It seems as if their besetting sin has vanished.

Earlier, they were astonished at being seated in birth order—how did this Egyptian know their birth order? *They suspect nothing*. You and I know, it is because Joseph was their brother and had first hand knowledge of their birth order. *But they do not know this!* I think that **drank and were merry** suggests that they had a really good time—lots of laughter, fellowship and good food. This is a foretaste of the banqueting joys we are to enjoy in heaven with Jesus, our elder brother, forever. Before God supplied designer sheep skin clothes for us, God prepared a menu in the garden of Eden. Food, and our dependency on it as we are on God, has always been central to our relationship with God. God feeds his children. In many pagan religions this is reversed: man exists to feed the gods (and their appetite is never satisfied).

So far, so good. But Joseph has devised a far more serious test of brotherly love. It's covered in the first five verses of Gen. 44: the concealment of Joseph's silver cup in Benjamin's sack (unknown to him) and the subsequent pursuit of the brothers by Joseph's steward: accusing someone of theft. It is a complete set-up, a trap. I am sure that Benjamin's reaction testified to his actual innocence: he had taken nothing. I also note a troubling declaration about that cup: **which indeed he uses for divination**. (v.5b)—a practice confirmed indirectly by Joseph in 44:15 **Do you not know that a man such as I can practice divination?** *Joseph did not need to practice divination* to know about the cup in Benjamin's sack because he ordered his cup to be placed there *so that his innocent younger brother would be falsely accused, threatened with enslavement in the presence of his brothers who had actually sold Joseph decades prior!* Would it matter to them? Were they less callous and cruel now? Had they considered the evil out there, as well as the evil in their own hearts? Were they motivated to **Do justice, love mercy and walk humbly before their God? (Micah 6:8)** The proof of the pudding is in the tasting! The test was in *their* reaction.

That reaction is recorded in v. 13: **Then they tore their clothes** (a sign of extreme distress and grief—even perhaps of remorse). . . **loaded their donkeys and returned to the city** (all of them!) . . . they return **to Joseph's house, and he was still there** (waiting for them?—or for Benjamin whichever it turned out to be). (v. 14) It's intriguing to consider what was running through his mind—I am fairly certain it was something between relief and joy. He may have considered that they had passed the test because they did not abandon Benjamin to the consequences of his alleged theft. However the test is not quite over. **Why have you repaid evil for good?** *Behind the mask of divination* Joseph implies what we understand from Scripture: **You may be sure your**

sins will find you out. There is a bite to this question for back on the day of his betrayal, when he had been sent on an errand of genuine concern for their well-being and safety (a “good”), they had maliciously put him in harm’s way and been indifferent to his “well-being.”

They are so certain of their innocence (and self-deceived!) that their response to the steward is too bold: **Whichever of your servants is found with it shall die and we shall be my lord’s servants** (meaning, voluntary enslavement for them all, I take it.) Now the steward replies: **Let it be as you say, he who is found with it shall be my servant and the rest of you shall be innocent.** (44:10) Are Joseph’s brothers innocent men? Not hardly. Do they repay evil for good? That has been their history, their past. Are they changed now?? Guilt, innocence and honesty are interwoven throughout this saga, like rich threads in a tapestry. I should repeat that: their past. Are they changed now?? Guilt, innocence, honor and honesty are interwoven throughout this saga, like rich threads in a tapestry. It is not merely about guilt—but honor, and the standing of Jacob, their father, as well.

Honesty. We may recall that Jacob rebuked his sons for their plain disclosure to the Egyptian governor. *You should have lied about it—you have brought all this trouble upon me!* Gen. 43:6 but they are not moved at all in this crisis moment. **Why feel guilty about being guileless?** Good for them. Judah is very plain with Joseph. “It will kill our father if Benjamin does not return with us—**his life is wrapped up in this boy.**” He might have added, “And my own life will be forfeit, too.” That was because he offered himself as surety for Benjamin’s safe return. **Let me remain instead.** (v.33) This is self-sacrificing love—a love for Benjamin as well as for his father Jacob. *Something has to have changed!* I realize that the famine has created a generalized concern that the family not starve to death—this goes much deeper than concern for their well-being!

It is a very rich irony that earlier, when they first arrived as his “honored guests,” **When Joseph came home . . . he inquired about their well-being and said, “Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke?”** (vv. 26-28) Concern for their well-being is what got him enslaved in the first place! Jacob’s concern as carried by Joseph. (Gen. 37:14) **Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock.** That is very rich. Twenty years later, *after all that they have put him through*, he is still inquiring about their well-being—their standing before God. What we are considering is that Joseph has a concern for their souls, for their relationship with God. That, on its own is a very encouraging piece of information—compassion, like consideration is a choice. I say consideration because a concern for the falsely accused, a concern for the cause of justice in the face of injustice, or false accusations, or slander even—such consideration is tied to motivation, a willingness to see to other’s interests put first, altruism, selflessness, and even service. A “considerate” person would be inclined to **Do justly, love mercy and walk humbling before his God.** (Micah 6:8) **They are as they should be before God—it is well with their souls.** Over time, such an individual would attain a disposition of godliness. In view of such being, “Be nice.” appears as the very low bar

that it is. Jesus did not say, “Be nice” . . . he said, “**Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you.**”

Yes, it is not the same Joseph they sold into slavery but he has escaped bondage to revenge and pay back—God is able, despite incredible odds, to keep the heart tender. It is as if he has chosen to forgive them before they realized their need for it, or, more profoundly, despite themselves. And that is why he seeks to know **if they be honest men** . . . can he trust them? Or, are they still, base fellows and scoundrels??

And what I said for Joseph can be said for Judah as well. He has changed for the better. I am of the opinion that his daughter-in-law, Tamar,⁴ as it were, happened to him.

⁴“ **She is more righteous than I, since I did not give her my son Shelah,**” Genesis 38:26

This is a turning point of history. Judah recognizes his wrong and he repents!

We read that and we think, “Sure he did, that is the proper response. You screw up, you repent, and you ask forgiveness. That’s how this thing works.” Let me reach through this screen and shake you while I scream “–NO! NO! NO! IT WASN’T! THIS IS SOMETHING RADICALLY BRAND NEW! NOWHERE IN THE PREVIOUS HISTORY OF SCRIPTURE TO THIS POINT HAS ANYTHING LIKE THIS BEEN SEEN!!!” [Which is why it’s included.]

Others had accepted God’s love, acceptance, and provision. Others had been thankful and obedient. Others had called out to God for help, but no one else had had the guts to stand up and admit their guilt before God and the world. Judah alone, out of all the patriarchs, feels sorrow for what he has done, and Judah alone demonstrates how that type of brokenness changes who we are. In Genesis 44, he will stand before the second highest man in Egypt, before the brother he betrayed, and he will offer up his own life for the life Benjamin. He will prove that he has laid aside self-interest and moves through this life with compassion and humility because he learned it at the hands of a woman. Is it any wonder that Judah was deemed worthy to be the father of the tribe that would bring give birth to our Savior?

So how then shall we view Tamar? Were her actions blessed and divinely sanctioned? I doubt it. As much as I want her to be the shining heroine, she failed to act in faith and resorted to self-reliance in order to achieve justice on her behalf. And while God blessed her with twin boys who would be the pride of a nation, and her name would be praised among the women, she would return to that place of limbo the wife, but not quite wife, of Judah who would never be intimate with her again. (Genesis 38:26) We do not know how the story would have played out *if she had made her appeal to God instead of scheming to manipulate circumstance*, but the Bible was never big on telling us what should have happened and offers to us instead what did happen. In doing so, we are confronted with the God of redemption who does not erase our mistakes or even our willfulness, but folds them into the pages of history as a testament to his mercy and power to redeem all things.

I believe Tamar is remembered and celebrated for two reasons:

Her story is a cautionary tale for men, not to trifle with the lives of women or fear the consequences. From her life we learn the significance of the kinsman redeemer, and the gravity with which God views such a role. First demonstrated in the deadly consequences of Onan’s abuse and neglect under the guise of obedience, and then in the blessing of children as she took what was hers by law. For while I do not believe her actions were as God would have desired, he protected her first from Judah’s recognition at the roadside and then from his wrath when she dared to expose his shame as Judah, also by right of law, could have commanded her death despite his involvement. [See Lev. 21:9—her burning tells us about her father, a Canaanite priest]

Tamar was the rock against which Judah was broken. She showed him what it was to be the recipient of the sins that he had committed against others. Through her he knew the grief of Jacob in losing his son,

He formerly thought she was a threat of death, the worst thing that could happen to his family, his sons. His wicked sons were put to death by God for their evil! She, in fact, could be seen as one of the best things that ever came into his life: her right to a family accompanied her appointed role as the mother to Perez, the one through whom the messianic seed would pass down to David, and Zerah, of whom we hear very little. Tamar, the Canaanite daughter of a Canaanite priest, was a link in the genealogical chain that would issue, in the fullness of time, with the Messiah, our Lord and Savior! Judah's re-evaluation of her is the path of wisdom . . . his embrace of her as the mother to his grandsons and as the heir of the inheritance of the firstborn (as the wife of Er) is enormously significant. ***She is the rock that broke the man***—she acted redemptively, above and beyond wisely. I have arrived at this position by reconsidering the phrase; ***She is more righteous than I***, Judah faces the gravity of his mistreatment of her, ***since I did not give her my son Shelah***. (Gen. 38:26) By breach of covenant with her, he deprived her of access to the seed of Judah through legitimate channels (the practice of the *levirate* marriage, aimed at securing the inheritance of the first born which was Tamar's by virtue of her marriage to Er, Judah's first born, who was deceased). She deceived Judah, and received his seed directly through an act of fornication (harlotry, adultery/incest?)—which God certainly doesn't approve of.

And, as the daughter of a Canaanite priest, she incurred the punishment of death *by burning*, to purify the defiling of her father! It is fascinating to read back into the narrative the significance of death by burning (See Lev. 21:9). It both informs us of her parentage/status and explains why she wasn't simply taken out to be stoned. Furthermore, it suggests to us that Judah, having a daughter-in-law who was the daughter of a Canaanite priest, was possibly quite involved in Baal worship—especially the engagement in cult prostitution at sheep shearing time/a pagan festival. Tamar disguised herself as a cult prostitute, the kind that Judah consorted with, so he fell for her ruse because that is what he commonly did—his sex habits. His “cord” is, according to Jewish sources, possibly the insignia of the Canaanite cult of Astoreth/Asarte practiced in that region—like a membership card to the Playboy Club. Judah was deeply implicated and Er, his son, more so.

However, God's purpose that the seed of the Messiah be passed down through Judah and Tamar and on down to King David and Jesus, was not frustrated by Judah's refusal to keep his word. Plainly God is not ashamed to have a Canaanite woman participate in that genealogy—it was appointed for Tamar to be the mother of Perez (the messianic line) and Zerah. She obtained the family that was her by right as a woman, and she secured the inheritance that Judah had tried to defraud her of(!) whether intentionally, or

through her he knew what it was to be duped and played for a fool, and through her he knew what it was to repay evil for evil, but above all he learned the power of repentance and honesty before the Lord and others. I believe that it is for this reason Tamar is remembered, not as example to be followed but rather *as the means through which God softened the heart of jaded man*. And this is why I call this story for men so that they might not repeat the sins of Judah against the women God has placed in your care.
<http://misdirectedmusings.blogspot.com/2015/06/tamar-story-for-men.html>

not; whether driven by fear or self-protection. Scripture relates his superstitious sense that everyone who married Tamar would die!

Judah's confession⁵ here appears to be remarkable in this regard—it may be the first time that a man is recorded: repenting of his sin. If so then this is a major spiritual turning point in his life and that, not the sordid episode, is why this story is included in Scripture. It's about redemption and repentance more than it is about sexual depravity—although it covers both. Some might ask why bring this up again? And I would remind us that I am speaking about the genuineness of repentance in the life of Joseph's brothers. This incident occurs between the sale of Joseph and the interview with Joseph as governor and, if we follow, the reasoning here, appears to contribute something to our understanding. A repentant Judah fits the man who stands up to his father's faithless insecurity, and selfish focus, serves a security for his younger brother and selflessly offers to be enslaved in Benjamin's place. These are the actions of a man of stature, compassionate and considerate—considering the depths from which he rose up.

In other words, Judah before Joseph is manifesting spiritual maturity, courage and honesty. He acts as a changed person (repentance entails change). That the brothers return en masse to Joseph suggests—given the offer of freedom by the steward—a more genuine and general repentance has occurred. So we have evidence of repentance, firstly, in that none of the brothers manifest envy towards Benjamin at the table. Subsequently, and secondly, we have further evidence in the saga of their return to Joseph's house, *en masse* to address the matter of the alleged theft. They did not cut and run as they might have earlier in their spiritual journey. And thirdly, we have the evidence of Judah's transformed life!

In Gen. 45 Joseph will unmask himself. He will make himself known to the incredulous others, who, unfortunately, retreat initially into fear and guilt—**and not gladness, relief and gratitude**. It is forgiveness that enables me to deal more fully with my sinful past so I thank God when conviction comes—when conviction comes peace cannot be far behind. It doesn't mean my sinfulness didn't matter then, or now; but it does mean that by grace I have been exonerated and set free. That is wonderful!

They are **dismayed at his presence** (v.3) and, not merely at his affect (**the weeping loudly** bit), they are staggered by the passionate, undeserved love that Joseph still has for them. It is so unexpected that I am not quite sure that they ever are able to fully accept the reality of his forgiveness (which is a really good reason not to sin, or transgress in the first place!). *They may have thought*, If he, Joseph, knew who we were all along, if he knew that we tried to eliminate him, *how is it that he so generously showers us with blessings, with goodness, and with provision for all our needs, and all*

⁵ "Others had accepted God's love, acceptance and provision. Others had been thankful and obedient. Others had cried out for help, but not one else had the guts to stand up and admit their guilt before God and the world. Judah alone, out of all the patriarch, feels sorrow for what he has done, and Judah alone demonstrates how that type of brokenness changes who we are."

See <http://Misdirectedmusings.blogspot.com/2015/06/tamar-stroy-for-men.html>

the needs of our little ones?! The children of wrath are geared towards revenge and pay back, are they not? They would rather get even than be freed. Not me!! Suddenly all of his severity, and even the tests he put them through make perfect, godly sense.

Joseph concludes that they are repentant and I suggest we join him in that assessment—the evidence is in the text.

Amen.