

Sermon for 16th August 2020: Living out our Salvation - Reconciled Relationships

Texts: Genesis 45: 1-15; Psalm 133

Let us begin with a review of the sermons of the last few weeks, because the themes covered lead us naturally to where we are today.

For 3 weeks we looked at the promise of eternal life that is contained in John 14: 1-7. The basic message is that we need to trust God that when we die our souls will go to heaven and dwell there with God.

However, last week we looked at the Biblical teaching that tells us that his life after death with God in heaven is not the end of the story! Revelation 21 talks about a new creation that will bring heaven and earth together at the end of time as we know it. This will be a renewing and restoration of all creation, including renewed bodies for our souls!

But in the meantime, while we are here on this earth, we have been called by God to work with him to be part of this renewal project that we pray for each week:

*"Your kingdom come,
Your will be done on earth
as it is in heaven"*

A central element of this task is relational! In Eden we see harmonious and flourishing relationships between God and people, people with others, people with themselves, and people with the earth. Yet how quickly this can be smashed!

Adam and Eve fall out with God and each other! They become wracked with debilitating guilt and find themselves at odds with the very earth that sustains them.

Philip Yancey tells a story in his book *What is so Amazing About Grace?* that captures this in real life. It is a story of broken family relationships that is replicated to some extent or another in families everywhere.

The story is set in an idyllic cherry farm in Michigan USA. The teenage daughter in the family is causing problems. After one explosive argument with her father she climbs out the window and hitches a ride to Detroit. Alone and penniless, she is picked up by a pimp and as a 13-year-old is put to work as an underage prostitute. Gradually her life becomes a drug addicted mess and 18 months on she finds herself living on the cold winter streets of New York. One night, half asleep, she has a dream or a vision of her home in Canada, of running with her dog amongst the blossom trees on her family's cherry orchard. She decides to go home! Phone calls home to warn them she is reappearing after all this time go unanswered, but she leaves a message to let them know the time of her arrival. On the bus trip home all kinds of fears well up in her; what if they didn't get the message? What if they did, but wanted nothing to do with her? What if they rejected her once they saw her wasted away as she had become? Eventually, just before midnight, her bus pulled into her small home town. It was dark and there was no sign of any life. Disappointed, she decided maybe it was best to get on the bus again and keep going. Needing to go to the toilet though, she opened the door to the bus shelter. Nothing could have prepared her for what came next. The lights came on, there were her Mum and Dad, her brothers and sisters, her grandparents, her friends, and a big sign "welcome home". As her Mum came forward to hug her, the apologies began to form on her lips, only to be smoothed away by the tender, forgiving touch of her Mother's fingers! She was home!

What a touching story of relationship breakdown and beautiful reconciliation! How wretched the dislocation, how blessed the reconciliation.

The Psalm today talks about the blessedness of unity in family life.

Verse one carries the meaning of an inheritance intact. This was very important in the Hebrew culture. Rather than dividing up the estate between the children when parents died, it was regarded best to keep everything together, with the extended family living together in harmony on the large embracing compound. That is why, in Luke's gospel, the story of the Prodigal Son was so shocking – the younger son

wanted his share of the estate to do with it whatever he wanted! This was not the Hebrew way. The Hebrew way is close knit, harmonious extended family dwelling alongside each other.

Verses 2-3 refer to an idea we have been playing with in recent weeks: heaven and earth touching!

The oil running down is referring to the heavenly blessing of God coming down upon a king or priest as they are anointed into their role! It seems to me to have at least two dimensions. Firstly, God is always forgiving and reconciling relationships. This should be an inspiration and a model for us in our relationship. So the example of God cascades down into our lives, inspiring us to respond by doing likewise. Secondly, this oil running down represents approval and delight. In the age of text icons, this would be the big thumbs up, that is God gives his enthusiastic approval to human life live in unity with others,

The dew on the ground communicates the idea of growth and vitality coming up from the ground. Dew was a vital component in that land of little rainfall – it was the dew that nourished all-important grass growth up from the land. A word that is popular with theologians at the moment is flourishing. It is captured here – when people dwell in unity it allows growth and flourishing!

So, blessing from above and growth from below – “Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven” is represented in these 2 verses.

Verse 4 then talks about how this kind of unity commands a **blessing!** There is a huge and obvious contrast here to Genesis 3 & 4, when the relational harmony of Eden was smashed apart, particularly graphically recorded in the Cain and Abel stories as God and Cain converse after he has killed his brother. The blessings of the garden are replaced by the curse of exile.

⁹ *The LORD asked Cain, “Where is your brother Abel?”*

He answered, “I don't know. Am I supposed to take care of my brother?”

¹⁰ *Then the LORD said, “Why have you done this terrible thing? Your brother's blood is crying out to me from the ground, like a voice calling for revenge. ¹¹ You are placed under a **curse** and can no longer farm the soil. It has soaked up your brother's blood as if it had opened its mouth to receive it when you killed him. ¹² If you try to grow crops, the soil will not produce anything; you will be a homeless wanderer on the earth.”*

(Genesis 4:9 -12)

This, then, is the language of blessings and curses. And don't we know that family disintegration is a cursed thing!

One family that knew such a cursed breakdown was Joseph's family. We read about this in Genesis 37-45. Today's reading captures their reconciliation, but the prequel to this was one of devastating family breakdown – favouritism, jealousy, family violence, loss of a son who was sold into slavery by his brothers.

Then comes a chance at reconciliation. On the surface, Joseph is the key player here – he recognises them they don't recognise him. The ball is in his court; Joseph the aggrieved one need to take the initiative. But it is not all about him. Walter Brueggemann, in his commentary on Genesis, describes insightfully the other dynamics:

The guilt of the brothers.

The grief of the father.

The desire for revenge in Joseph.

So familiar, these dynamics in relationship breakdown!

There is another vital dynamic to understand here before reconciliation can be healthily reached - the attitude of the brothers. The question is around whether their attitude had changed? If it hadn't, was relationship reconciliation a safe place to go?

I personally have been the victim of an abusive friendship relationship. While I have needed to forgive, upon expert advice from a mentor who is a psychologist, I am not safe to go back into that relationship until

attitudes have changed. Joseph wanted to know that his younger brother, Benjamin, had not received the same treatment that he did, hence his strange request for the brothers to go all the way back home and bring Benjamin back! Seeing with his own eyes that the brothers had changed was the breakthrough this situation needed, the game changer! There was not just guilt on the part of those brothers, but also repentance! And there was a God factor! A recognition that terrible as this all was, God was at work in the messiness to bring beautiful reconciliation, therefore blessing!

Conclusion

As we ponder this into our lives of complex relationships, may God work in our hearts to be agents of reconciliation and blessing, not cursed revenge! I encourage you to prayerfully consider areas of your relational life where you need to work on repair and reconciliation, so that you can watch and experience the blessing that follows!