



SERMONS THAT WORK

Epiphany 7 (C)

Power

[RCL] **Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42; 1 Corinthians 15:35-38,42-50; Luke 6:27-38**

Once upon a time, two children were playing with toy figures. One had a comic book superhero and the other had a princess from an animated show. When an evil villain appeared in their adventure, a conundrum occurred: Who would rescue hostages and bring the villain to justice? Each child thought their figure should be the one who did it. Both characters wanted justice and knew it might take self-sacrifice in order to give hope at the end of the adventure. The superhero wanted to bring the villain to trial through violence and the princess wanted to appeal to the villain's good side with a magical song that would compel them to stop hurting people. The superhero's approach has a primal appeal—throwing power around through violent retaliation. The princess' approach is an interpersonal one—using supernatural gifts to give someone a second chance to do better. Which do you think won out?

In contemporary American culture, media and advertisers tell us that, in order to have a happy life, we need to be wealthy, and if we cannot be wealthy, then we should have enough followers to make us a social media influencer, which usually ends in some kind of wealth anyway. We have also been shaped by the examples of conflict resolution that require power over another through retaliatory violence—physical, emotional, mental, and/or sexual. In television and movies, superheroes and princesses are not real people, and, in their worlds, justice often occurs by the wielding of power, either through violence or magic. Typically, neither superhero nor princess is poor or non-violent. While these make entertaining stories, the insidiousness of privilege based on wealth and justice through retaliation and not reconciliation is reflected from our current culture back to us. There is no place for God here. So, what does this mean for a follower of Jesus?

The complexity of God's role in reconciliation is exemplified in the story of Joseph's encounter with his brothers, who threw him in a pit and left him to be sold into slavery. Joseph, of the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat fame, comes face to face with his brothers years after his entrapment and enslavement. He dismisses his servants and speaks with his brothers alone, sobbing uncontrollably. Asking after his father first reveals that his primary concern is for that relationship and not the one with his brothers. It is an intimate moment where Joseph confirms his identity, and it also reveals the ways in which God has made meaning and good from actions that were rooted in sin and tragedy.

Human nature being what it is, the brothers do not know what to make of Joseph's behavior. As shock ebbs away, they are overwhelmed and amazed that this person who they wronged is not sending them away or executing them. After all, that is what they likely would have done if their roles were reversed. Reconciliation is a process instead of immediate: Joseph tries to make their relationship more equal by dismissing the servants so he could speak freely in Hebrew with his brothers, but he still speaks from a place of power and dominance because of his station in Pharaoh's household. He tries to show that what God has done in his life is independent of everything that had happened between them and that now, Joseph can show how God's concern for life is for everyone, not just him. None of this works immediately on the brothers. They are simply too unsure of what is happening to trust what Joseph is telling them. Full reconciliation occurs later in Joseph's story, which we do not get to witness today.

No matter which time period we are in, reconciliation is a process and can take many forms. Many people believe reconciliation means going back to being the way you were or forgetting what happened and moving forward from there. In a world of violence, reconciliation can only come after an attack and must be desired by both parties - if it happens at all. Better yet, is there a way to avoid needing to reconcile in the first place? Jesus speaks of a different way of responding when facing violence to the heart, body, and/or spirit. There is no Christian justification for vengeance and retaliation. While some early Christians were soldiers, it was not encouraged because the Roman religion that was tied to serving in the military was seen as idolatrous. Furthermore, killing another human being was wrong on principle. Jesus taking away Peter's sword at Gethsemane was one of the compelling arguments for the latter.

Today's Gospel challenges the disciples and us to think beyond the culture of violence in which they lived. Luke is writing to the communities of Gentile Christians in Rome, Greece, and Asia Minor. A question for this community was: Could they be both Christians and good citizens of the empire in which they lived? Systems of ethical teachings circulated widely throughout Greco-Roman and Jewish societies during Jesus' life and the first centuries of early Christian tradition. Luke's theme of discipleship is clear and has Jesus going even beyond the ethical standards of the day. Both then and now, Jesus' instructions about accumulating wealth and possessions and responding to hostility can sound weak or simple. However, when we dig deeper into what Jesus is teaching, there is nothing passive about his aggressive commitment to non-violence and his repudiation of using wealth and privilege as power over others.

How often in our lives do we feel powerless when we are up against wealth, privilege, and violence? Jesus' teaching is radical because he invites us into a very active and power-full response to these things. As disciples, we are not asked to roll over and accept violence; instead, Jesus lists the ways we may be attacked and then tells us to actively do something additional, something that those who oppose us do not expect. Non-violent action directly combats the dark underbelly of materialism and hostility. This has been proven effective in large and small ways. The website stopbullying.gov says that if we are faced with bullying in schools and in public places, being an *upstander*—someone who intervenes, interrupts, or says something to stop the activity—instead of a *bystander*—someone who watches and does nothing—significantly curtails bullying. The life of the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu also showed us numerous examples of non-

violent response, especially in his longstanding work of opposing the state-sponsored racism known as *apartheid* in his native South Africa. Jesus, of course, gives us other examples in our Gospel today.

An individual making a non-violent response makes a difference, and a group of people does even more. This is where our behavior as disciples is key. Both Jesus and Archbishop Tutu teach us how to actively counter violence with non-violence. What would the world look like if we actually did this as individuals, groups, and communities? People notice how and when we respond to the violence and corruption of the world around us. When we reaffirm our Baptismal vows in the words of the Baptismal Covenant, we say that we will persevere in resisting evil and that we will seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving our neighbors as ourselves. This is our call to action. May we follow Jesus now as disciples in this modern world, transforming it with God's help. AMEN.

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