

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

From what we can discern, what we have heard, and what we have read in scripture, God loves a good creative project. And one of God's favorite projects is taking life's lemons and making lemonade. In church-speak, we call that redemption. When presented with the sour things human beings do and say, God loves to roll up the sleeves, gather the appropriate ingredients, and prepare redeeming opportunities for refreshment and new life. Now, it's nice, of course, when the fruit we bear in our lives is pleasant right off the tree, but when we produce fruit which is just too sour, then God begins squeezing, mixing in an appropriate amount of sweetening forgiveness, some ice-cold, chilling awareness of our own sin, and a healthy dose of living water, and stirs us up good until what we have done and who we have become has been redeemed and restored, transformed and transfigured, turning lemons into lemonade. Take the biblical case of Joseph and his brothers, the sons of Jacob, who has himself been redeemed and re-named "Israel" by God Almighty.

In last week's reading from the Book of Genesis, we began the saga of Joseph, hearing how his jealous older brothers sold him into slavery and told father Israel that he had been killed by wild beasts. Jacob has mourned the loss of his son for many years, while the brothers have lived with their guilt. Meanwhile they have started their own families, and their crime has led them to distrust each other and drift apart. Their family system, the one in which God had put so much hope for the future, has become increasingly dysfunctional. What they don't know is that Joseph, whom they presumed dead and gone, has surprisingly become a powerful leader in Egypt, thanks to gifts of foresight and courage and God's love of a creative project. When a famine grips the land, and things get desperate, Israel calls his remaining sons together and bids them travel to Egypt for help and provisions. And today in our reading we have heard how that all turns out. Although they don't recognize him at all, they have dealings with Joseph himself, are indeed helped in their predicament. Now, finally and suddenly, the brother whom they had treated so sinfully reveals his true identity to them. You can imagine the retribution they must have feared would befall them.

Instead, Joseph greets them with authentic joy, with brotherly love. Astonished and apologetic, they embrace their little brother with tears of joy. There in the courts of Egypt they have a little family reunion. Back home, Jacob is informed of the miraculous outcome (but not of the original crime) and is also overjoyed. There is great celebrating, great relief, great refreshment, as all drink the lemonade God's creative project has produced. (lemonade, not Kool-Aid, BTW) Mind you, the lemony taste is still there, a reminder of the sin which stings the lips and lingers in the aftertaste, but God has sweetened the memory enough that they all look forward to their next gulp just the same. "Oh, how good and pleasant it is, when brethren live together in unity!" And at Joseph's invitation, the families of Israel, with all their flocks and herds, their wives and children, their possessions and their dreams, move from Canaan to Egypt for the duration of the famine, which only sets God up for the challenge of another project, of course. (remember Moses?!)

But what if Joseph had not forgiven his brothers? Suppose he had held the obvious grudge; suppose he had sent them away empty-handed out of spite. We are often reluctant to ask the 'what if'

question when reading the Bible; it is, after all, the inspired word of God, and ought not to be questioned or altered. But don't the scriptures themselves provide an opportunity to ponder, to reflect, to inquire? If not, then they are just a report, a longish set of minutes for the meetings God has had with the people, meant to record the divine interaction. The scriptures, my friends, ought to be more than just that: they should provoke us to consider their message, to question its assumptions, to ask: what if..? What if Adam had not eaten the apple? What if Noah had refused to build the ark? What if the fishermen had declined to follow Jesus into his mission? What if Joseph had never even had the opportunity to help his brothers in their time of need?

But Joseph has done a faithful thing. He has forgiven his brothers. It is an act of faithfulness to God and a generous offering to the great eternal dream of God. Joseph might well have held a grudge, but he chooses to contribute to the salvation of the world by setting his own personal justification aside and choosing love as a better alternative. God is love, and love is displayed by forgiveness. The scriptures are a witness, for sure, but a witness not only to the facts of the story, but also to the heart of the story. God makes us, loves us, and intends to keep us close, through thick and thin. And the key which unlocks that closeness is forgiveness; without it, the door to creation remains unopened, and the path forward is blocked. What if we devoted ourselves to unlocking the door? What if we could just forgive ourselves and others and embrace possibilities yet unseen and unfulfilled?

We often refer to God as "the Almighty", and with good reason. Think of the strength and creativity with which God treats our discretions and indiscretions. Think of the awesome devotion and commitment God places in the covenant with each of us. Think of the many times each day God needs to turn our lemons into lemonade. When confronted by his critics, Jesus makes his own lemonade by using the event as a teaching opportunity. While others are focused on how he and the disciples are putting food into their mouths, he teaches that it is more important to pay attention to what comes out of our mouths. The hateful, disrespectful things we speak aloud are what can defile us if we are thoughtless and careless. What's even worse, those things we say may well be evidence of deeper, more pervasive and perverse sinfulness. What our voices reveal, things like disrespect for life, racial prejudice, bigotry, and so on, are antithetical to our covenant with the God of love, the grace of Christ, and the fruits of the Spirit. While we have pledged to align ourselves with God's great dream, we pray that we may not become yet another project for God's redeeming efforts.

Yes, God loves a good creative project, but so should we. We ought to be enthusiastic about rolling up our own sleeves and getting to work on our faithful response to God's invitation, God's call that we become our best selves. We ought to take every opportunity to align ourselves with God's grace, sweetening the slurry with bountiful forgiveness with the courage of heroes. And imagine that you are receiving the living water poured over your scalp in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as you did at baptism. And imagine that you are being sealed as Christ's own forever with the anointing of chrism oil. Imagine that anointing being so generous that the holy oil flows down from your head, through your beard (if you have one) and down the collar of your robe, as it is described in today's Psalm. What if you recognized that forgiving gesture as an opportunity? What if in our faithfulness no one was ever sent away empty-handed? What if? Amen