

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

Two weeks ago, our son Scott and his family, with puppy, arrived here in central NY from Texas. They rented a house 3 miles down the road from us for the next three months. And now, as they are finishing their 2 weeks of quarantine, we will finally get to spend some blessed time with them in person. So, there is going to be a little Smith reunion in our backyard this afternoon! My Texan grandchildren, Nova and Sagan, love to make things. They love doing projects. Give them an empty toilet paper tube and a ball of twine, and they are occupied for hours! So, granddaughter Nova, when she heard about this family gathering, right away came up with the idea of making lemonade from scratch. This was her vision, her project. So, we assembled all the ingredients: a bag of lemons, some honey for sweetener, a few full ice cube trays, and, of course, lots of fresh water. Aunt Marietta is bringing her fancy juicer from Rochester, an extension cord has been extended to the back yard, and a sturdy metal table has been placed where all can observe the progress of this special project. We have tried to think of any way we can to assist and facilitate nine-year-old Nova's vision.

From what we can discern, what we have heard, and what we have read in scripture, God loves a good creative project, too. 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?!)

We often refer to God as “the Almighty”, and with good reason. Think of the strength and creativity with which God treats our discretions. 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. Last week, I reminded you of our baptismal covenant, by which we make vows and promise to make God’s redemptive work a little easier. 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.

So, I ask you today to join me in renewing our baptismal vows and promises, having both trust and faith that God will help us keep them. Yes, God loves a good creative project, but so should we. If Little Nova can delight in making lemonade, then we, too, 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 with the stamina of youthful grandchildren. Often when we offer this renewal of vows in person, I sprinkle you with water with a cedar branch in what’s called the Asperges. Well, today from this distance, you’ll just have to imagine it. And imagine, too, 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. Please join me in this renewal of our covenant...

[the renewal of vows begins with the Apostles’ creed...the singing of hymn 565 will be delayed until after the vows]