

The Acorn of Grace

August 16, 2020

Last week, in our first reading, we heard the story of the boy Joseph being thrown into a well, and then sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. In my children's message, I then drew out of that frightening story how it's OK to be sad, and it's OK to be scared. Imagine Joseph's fear—down there at the bottom of the well, or as he was being carted away, in chains.

This week, we get the happy ending. Joseph is a prince in Egypt. And he's reunited with his brothers. He forgives them. And even more: he's going to protect them from seven years of plague by bringing them to the land of Goshen, where they will eat from the filled coffers of Egypt—and live.

Now, it would be right and proper for us to simply stay there with that happy ending—since God knows most of us could use a little good news these days, right?

But I want us to dwell, just for a little while, on another side of the story: they are in EGYPT. And we know what happens to the people of Israel in Egypt, right? A Pharaoh comes along who didn't remember Joseph, and then these strange Israelites wind up, like Joseph as the story begins, in chains.

And then there's our story from the Gospel of Matthew that I just read—which is supposed to be good news, but in fact is a pretty horrifying account of demonic possession (more on that shortly), racism, and a healing that, when we're honest, we find really hard to believe.

So, where is the good news in all of THAT? By the time I'm done this morning, I hope that you can see the acorn of grace in the midst of this season of famine and racism and rot. I hope that you can understand that this acorn of grace is the seed out of which a mighty forest of oaks will arise, oaks that are all connected in roots and branches, like us, breathing together, finding strength to grow. So, wait for it—but I'll give it all away now: the acorn of grace is Jesus, crucified for us, dying for us of COVID-19. The acorn of grace is Jesus, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor, drawing us into a more loving and just community of the beloved. The acorn of grace is new life in Christ, our lives forgiven and restored, coming out of the dust and fear and anger and resentment of death into the bright sunrise of tomorrow.

Now, when we hear about demonic possession these days, we tend to dismiss it as one of those things from the past that we've now overcome, without our commitments to science, and to evidence, and following experts who have gained knowledge in various fields who know what they're talking about. Oh, wait. Maybe, then, demonic possession isn't like Hollywood describes it—you know, projective vomit and heads

spinning around on swivels. Maybe, in fact, demonic possession is ANY captivity that keeps us from flourishing. Maybe, in fact, when we have eyes to see, we can recognize folks, maybe even some in our family, who are sadly, tragically, terribly—possessed. Do you have eyes to see?

Take racism. Jesus gives us a pretty good example in our gospel for today. He calls a Canaanite woman a dog. This is not a term of endearment. Jesus, in this story, is a racist. He slurs this woman from another race of people who has come to him for help. We need to let that sit there for a minute, I know—but it's the fact of the matter: Jesus himself demonstrates exactly the kind of hate speech that would, today, get any employee of any company fired.

But what's interesting in our story—and important for us to understand as we undertake our own anti-racism work here at Union—is that Jesus doesn't stay there. He's persuaded to move from that opinion—which his disciples reinforce, by the way—by the demonstrable LOVE and resilience and refusal to be put down by the Canaanite woman. Or, as Michelle Obama put it: “they go low. We go high.” And Jesus drops his racism.

Not everyone, however, is Jesus. Some remain possessed, often unknowingly, by the patterns and habits of thought and culture they have learned, and that they assume are superior to other habits of thought and culture. Hence, white supremacy. And here's the problem: the most dangerous white supremacists aren't the ones who know they're white supremacists. The most dangerous racists are the ones who are like the daughter possessed, perhaps; or the ones who eventually crucify Jesus: they don't know what they are doing. Which is why in our anti-racism work here at Union, we're focusing, at first, on learning, listening, understanding.

Now, this is all complicated, of course, by the fact that we are living in a season of plague. We aren't, we can pray—facing seven years of famine—but it sure would be nice to have leaders in place, like Joseph, who have the wisdom to anticipate problems and to plan for them appropriately—with an eye on the common good. There are, of course, no guarantees that even with such leadership everything will work out—eventually, a Pharaoh comes along who doesn't remember Joseph, and then another crisis, another plague, threatens the well-being of the people of God. It's like that for us as individuals, and as communities. We find times of feast, and famine—and it is wise when we plan accordingly. It is even wiser when we take those times of famine, or plague, to help bring the feast to others. Joseph's generosity—his capacity to forgive—is, of course, the point of this story.

And Jesus' healing of the Canaanite woman's daughter? It's hard to believe, isn't it? How, in an instant, could such healing happen? How can we, living in this pandemic, find such healing? It's hard to believe.

Julian of Norwich—it's not her real name; it's the name given to her because she worshiped at St. Julian's church in Norwich, England—lived from about 1343 to 1416 during an outbreak of the bubonic plague. She may have lost her entire family to this terrible disease—which would explain, perhaps, why she became an Anchorite nun, one dedicated to solitary living. In any event, as described by Christian educator Sharon Ely Pearson, at the age of 30, Julian became gravely ill soon after Easter. A week later her parish priest visited her, bringing her a crucifix. "Look at it, and be strong," he said as he gave her last rites. Although she was very weak, she was able to look at the figure of Jesus on the cross, receiving insight into his suffering and love for us. Later she described how the room seemed to go dark as she felt she was about to die, but no longer felt any pain. Over the next twelve hours she saw wonderful things in her mind, as clearly as if they were real. She soon got well and wrote about her 15 visions (*shewings*) in what is now called *Revelations of Divine Love*. It is the first book written in English by a woman.

The central metaphor that Julian developed out of her mystical experiences is one near and dear to me, that I also developed in my book about sacred space: "*God is our clothing,*" Julian wrote, "*that wraps, clasps and encloses us so as to never leave us.*" God is THAT close to us, like an acorn to an oak.

In fact, in one of her visions, Ely Pearson goes on to explain, Julian saw something very small, about the size of a hazelnut lying in the palm of her hand. "What can this be?" she asked. "It is all that is made," was the answer she received. Julian worried: because it is so small, might not the hazelnut—which we can now see as a synecdoche for all of creation (look it up!)—might not this acorn disappear or be obliterated? Again came the reassuring answer: "It lasts and ever shall last because God loves it." This hazelnut—or acorn—is representative of all God has made. And Julian concludes from this vision of the accord three main points with which I'll wrap up my sermon for today: God made it. God loves it. God keeps it.

The Acorn of Grace: such a small thing! Yet that smallness contains the universe—just like us. Each of us is so fragile, and yet we contain all of God's love, beauty, goodness, truth within us, and between us, just like an oak contains the acorn and a forest contains the sun and rivers and soil. God made us. God loves us. God keeps us. The acorn of grace will grow into a forest of oaks—through the power of Jesus who inspires us to live fully, for others.

- Jesus frees. From any possession (including the prejudice of racism).
- Jesus forgives. We can forgive our neighbors who live in fear; their defiance is a cry for help, for compassion, not judgment. We can help free them, as Jesus freed us.
- And Jesus saves: FROM DEATH TO LIFE; doubt to trust; illness to healing. It's hard to believe, but I've seen it happen time and time again in my life, and in history. Just when we think it can't get any worse; just when we think death has

got us, for good—we realize that new life is opening before us, healing is coming, justice is on the horizon.

So, there's our good news, at last. Jesus frees. Jesus forgives. Jesus heals.

In my own life, there have been times when I've wondered: why, Lord? Why this cross? I get myself all wrapped up in worry—it feels like I'm dying. I can't possibly see a way through to the other side.

Maybe you've felt this way recently.

If so—and if you've NEVER felt this way, then you have truly lived a blessed life, IF SO—remember the acorn of grace; remember Julian of Norwich.

For whatever struggles we face, even death itself, when we look to the cross we can see Jesus there before us, telling us, like he told Julian: "I may take all things well; I can make all things well, and I will make all things well; and you shall see for yourself that all manner of things shall be well."

God made us. God loves us. God will keep us. Amen.

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