

August 16, 2020 (Focus: Genesis 45: 4-15)

How can the story of Joseph and his brothers help us in our time and place? Well, to address that question, I'm going to take a detour between that ancient story and ours, a detour through a WWII concentration camp. But I'm getting a little ahead of myself.

One of our key spiritual questions is "why?" We have lots of "why" questions. One of our key "why" questions is "why do people have to suffer?" Why did Jesus have to die? Why do bad things happen to good people? The "why" questions around suffering are among the most frustrating questions we have, for it seems so difficult to get satisfactory answers to them.

As long as I can remember, I wasn't one who ever found it satisfying to address a why question about suffering by going to the stock answer of "it is part of God's plan." That always raised more questions than answers for me. Why is it part of God's plan that bad things happen to good people? Why is it God's plan to make good people suffer by having to watch good things happen to bad people who don't deserve good things to happen to them? Wouldn't God plan better than that?

There was Joseph, sold into slavery by his own brothers, jealous because he was the favored one, but he no doubt wondered why he had to suffer to the degree he did. Through talent and hard work and luck (or divine providence, he would say), he gained power and influence among his Egyptian captors. In the meantime, his family suffered with the rest of his homeland under drought and famine, so much so that they came to Egypt eventually begging for food.

And as this story goes, it is a story of forgiveness and mercy, but it is also a story about Joseph finding meaning for the suffering he had endured. If he had to suffer because of how he was treated by his brothers, well, he was going to use what had happened to him to restore his relationship with them, and help them not starve to death.

In asking the why question, especially around suffering, we are searching for meaning, meaning behind what is happening to us or what is happening to a loved one. If we could just know there was a purpose, a meaning to our suffering, maybe we could endure it.

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues on, I sense more and more people getting frustrated, anxious, and despairing what is going on, and maybe they don't even realize it, but I think they are wanting a reason behind what is happening. Not a question about the science of the disease, what the source of the pandemic was or even how it continues, but more a philosophical/spiritual questioning of why is it that we have to suffer now, with all that the pandemic is causing in our lives not just in medical terms or even economic terms, but also in social and relationship terms. What is the meaning behind our suffering?

Viktor Frankl wrote about some of the big "why?" questions that humanity has, especially in terms of suffering, in his classic book "Man's Search for Meaning." I believe I've heard a number of you say that you have read this book; its been a while for me, but I thought of it as I was thinking of this story of Joseph and his brothers, and I think for our time and circumstances it is a good time to take it off the shelf and reread it.

"Man's Search for Meaning" has been called "an enduring work of survival literature."(NYT) It is Frankl's account of his time in the Nazi concentration camps, and his exploration of the human will to find meaning in spite of the worst adversity. At the heart of Frankl's theory of logotherapy (from the Greek word for "meaning") is a conviction that the primary human drive is not pleasure, as Freud maintained, but rather the discovery and pursuit of what the individual finds meaningful, that is, finding significance in the very act of living, in spite of all obstacles or suffering.

To Frankl there were three possible sources for meaning: in work (doing something significant), in love (caring for another person) and in courage during difficult times. Suffering in and of itself is meaningless; we give our suffering meaning by the way in which we respond to it. Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, you freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation. You cannot control what happens to you in life, but you can always control what you will feel and do about what happens to you. And what greater way to feel and what greater thing to guide your actions than love.

"We who lived in the concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof

that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: ...to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way."..."When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves."..."It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

Joseph could have chosen to cast his family aside, and few would have blamed him. They deserve it, for how they treated him. Yet he could see that his brothers were not the petulant jealous boys they once were, they were men, men who seemed to be taking care of one another and their father, doing all they could to help their people. Neither he nor his brothers were they same as they were when suffering was first inflicted in their relationship. And now his people were suffering. And yes, the wrong done to him which caused him years of suffering must be acknowledged, but it does not have to guide he actions.

Notice that Joseph doesn't say, well, God will act or not act to save you, it's all up to God. Instead he believes that the events of his life have had a purpose, have put him in the right time and place to be of help, and his faith in God is such that he knows he can be a means of grace by which God will save his people. Yes, even though it was Joseph that acted to save his people, God is not absent from the story, for it is his faith in God that inspires Joseph to act.

We are suffering right now, to varying degrees, and in various ways. Some have said, God saves, and have taken this as justification for their own inaction. But what meaning do we find in this pandemic? Maybe the suffering of the pandemic is not the source of the meaning, maybe the source of the meaning we can find for this time is in how we choose to respond to it – do we respond in love, of not just of ourselves but of each other and of our neighbors? Do we respond by caring for one another, and seeking that all may be well? When, like Joseph, we can respond by

sensing that God has given our life meaning and purpose because God loves us, whether we are lost or found, loves us even when we have doubts, or are discouraged, or angry, or fearful, and loves us even when, unlike Joseph, we have trouble forgiving, well, then we can let love give us depth and meaning of life. We can say, I will not let the suffering determine life, but rather let my response be the determining factor in how I bring meaning to my present circumstances.

How does God act in times of suffering? God is not the cause of the suffering. God is in our response to the suffering, if we are open to the love and light God has offered us. What a way to bring meaning to life, to understand that God can be in our response to the suffering, if we offer the love and light that God has offered to us. Amen.

Let us turn our hearts and minds again to God in prayer.

We turn to you, gracious God, in our own needs, and for the needs of others. There is much to pray for, for our needs are many, as are the needs of others. We pray for tangible things, like food and shelter and work, for clean water and air, for those who have none and for the anxieties surrounding them when they are threatened. We pray for healing and wholeness of body, for those who are ailing.

But so much of what we pray for are the intangibles of life, the things of mind and spirit. We pray for those anxious and worried in these difficult times. We pray for those struggling with mental illness, and those struggling with addiction. We pray for those grieving a loss, or the general loss of everyday simple joys.

We pray for us all, as we miss and yearn for those things like sitting with friends and family, being with someone in conversation, holding a hand or sharing a hug, things that add richness and meaning to our relationships. We yearn for the time when we can gather as your people and pass the peace and sing the hymns and fellowship around coffee cups and cookies. Grant us peace, as we endure circumstances not of our design, but which we choose to help ensure the health of those we love and our community.

We are grateful for this time of communal prayer, helping us to experience that we do not carry the spiritual load alone, that we do not struggle alone, and that you, gracious God, intend good for us. Help us to see beyond the questions and concerns to see all the good that is being done, all the people helped, all the acts of kindness and goodness. Help us to be the good that the world needs, helping people, offering acts of kindness and goodness wherever we can. Grant us your strength and courage and power of love, for we seek to be your people, your heart, your peace, your hope in all that we do.

Silent prayer/meditation

Holy God, mysterious and wondrous, bless us today and in the days ahead. Help us to proclaim in word and deed that the living Christ is in us and among us and for us all and all creation. Guide us to follow him always, even as we pray together the words he taught us to pray to you, saying, Our Father...