

Dear LAUMC: Letters to a Church in (Re)formation
God Is Here, Disguised as Your Life
Genesis 45:1-8

This has been another one of those weeks when it was clear that politics and religion are not always separate. We heard this week news of a draft Supreme Court decision that may change the law of this country on women's constitutional right to abortion. This issue has long divided us, and this week people on both sides felt, with equal passion, either that our country is on a long, dark slide, or that justice has finally been done. You no doubt have made your own decision about how to think about this question. But I want you to hear this morning what our United Methodist Social Principles say about this issue. This is a part of the official statement of our denomination.

The beginning of life and the ending of life are the God-given boundaries of human existence... Our belief in the sanctity of unborn human life makes us reluctant to approve abortion.

But we are equally bound to respect the sacredness of the life and well-being of the mother and the unborn child.

We recognize tragic conflicts of life with life that may justify abortion, and in such cases we support the legal option of abortion under proper medical procedures by certified medical providers.

We call all Christians to a searching and prayerful inquiry into the sorts of conditions that may cause them to consider abortion. We entrust God to provide guidance, wisdom, and discernment to those facing an unintended pregnancy.

I don't think any denomination, including ours, gets things right all the time, but in this case, I think the United Methodist Church's statement captures an important truth: that abortion is a complicated, personal, and almost always painful decision for everyone involved. The health and safety and well-being of *every* life involved has to matter to us—woman and child. No law should presume to understand every situation as if it were clear, or control every person as if they were the same.

Life is like that, isn't it—complicated. There are far fewer sharp lines between right and wrong than we might wish. It has always been so. The Hebrew Scripture story of Joseph, that we just read a little bit of this morning, is one of those twisty, complicated human dramas.

It comes from Genesis, the first book of the Bible, which is made up almost entirely of a multi-generational family saga. The story began with Abraham, who we talked about last week. Joseph, the main character in our reading today, is Abraham's great grandson, the eleventh son of Jacob. He's one of the brothers whose families became the twelve tribes of Israel. Those twelve tribes were the people who gathered together to escape slavery in Egypt, who crossed the Red Sea that parted miraculously to let them through, who wandered for forty years in the wilderness on the way to the land they believed God had promised to them.

The story we read today is about how they got to Egypt in the first place.

Joseph was his father's favorite son, all too obviously to everyone else in the family. There were mistakes all around: Jacob's insensitivity planted jealousy in between his children; Joseph was conceited and arrogant about his special status, the brothers couldn't get their resentment under control. It all boiled over one day. All of the brothers were out in the desert near their house. Joseph's older brothers had had it with his bragging, so they sold him to slave traders who were happy to take him off their hands. They told their father that Joseph had tragically been killed.

Joseph ended up in Egypt—young, poor, alone. But Joseph was clever and handsome, and he'd always had an innate sense of entitlement working for him. Those same characteristics that had driven his brothers crazy had great value out in the world. So of course he landed on his feet. And in not too much time he worked his way into a position of great power and influence in the government of the Egyptian Pharaoh.

Years later, a famine came. Drought covered a great swath of the Middle East. Egypt had stockpiled enough reserves to feed its people, but back home, the land where Jacob and his eleven sons lived was parched, dry as dust. So the brothers, now tribal elders themselves, traveled to the rich country, Egypt, to ask for food, enough to keep their families alive. They arrived at the Egyptian court, with no idea that Joseph was in charge. He recognized them immediately, but they couldn't see that this was their younger brother, now grown into a powerful man.

Think about the drama of this scene. Joseph and his brothers hadn't spoken to each other, seen each other, for decades. Joseph had been stewing for years over his family's unfairness toward him. He could still taste the bitterness in his mouth. Now, he had the power to send these hateful brothers away, their hands empty. It would probably mean death for them and their children. They did not deserve his compassion. He had been given a chance to work out his own sort of justice. It had been a long time coming.

He didn't anticipate the emotion, the tears, that would come to him, unbidden, in this moment. Joseph wept loudly, so uncontrollably that others, outside the room, could hear him. What was it that broke inside of him, now? Was it the weight of his power in this moment? The relief of finally getting his opportunity for revenge? Or was it the surprising persistence of his connection with these men who stood before him?

Finally he spoke.

'It's me, Joseph,' he said. 'I'm your brother.' They were terrified, of course; it was as if some ghost had seeped out of the scorched earth to punish them. 'It's OK,' the ghost-brother said. 'You didn't send me here; God did. Maybe God sent me ahead of you to make sure you'd survive. Even that terrible thing you did to me—God made something good from it. God saved my life. *That's what God does.* And now God is saving your lives. Don't be afraid. I will take care of you and your children.'" (Genesis 50:20-21)

I've compressed this story a little; Joseph didn't come to this change of heart all in one minute, or even a few days. He went back and forth more than a few times between finding forgiveness inside of him and working out his anger, the old fears he still remembered. But he got there. With words he probably barely believed himself, and actions he had to make himself take, he moved toward these people who had done him wrong. All by himself, he crossed the gap between them. He learned his way into what is true for all of us: that our lives are about something more than the sum of our fears and our hates, even our loves. That when we jam life—our lives—into moral categories, simple black/white, yes/no, right/wrong choices, it often doesn't fit. And we too get reduced to something smaller than the One in whose image we were created.

The complicated questions that come with real life require us to act bigger, to be bigger. Keeping score of the wrongs done, tallying up who deserves what, is not God's way. The biblical story reminds us, again and again, to hold back our judgment and do good, even to people who we're sure have done wrong; to bless those who are inclined to curse us; to pray for our enemies—all those things Jesus said. To act—to live our lives—as if God's purposes are being worked out in our lives, even when it's really hard to see. Even when the circumstances suggest something else.

The last two-and-more years have been hard on us. All of us. I don't know a person who isn't tired, a family that is not stressed, an organization that is not tentative about its future. This season has not favored strong, decisive, directed people. A great wave has washed over us and brought changes we mostly did not choose. Who are we, who will we be, as the waters of this great wave recede? What have we learned? Maybe this is a time that calls us to clarity: Is God a real player in our lives, a force for good we rely on; or are we functional atheists, people who speak faith but live as if there is nothing we can depend on other than ourselves, our own talent and skill and stored-up resources?

We—you—people of faith—the world needs the truth you come here to practice and to internalize. The truth that living out of our own control, the strength of even our best can-do spirit, isn't enough. First it makes us too sure, about too many things. Eventually, thinking we are alone responsible for taking care of ourselves and the people we love turns us small and petty, fearful, defensive.

It must have occurred to Joseph that if he forgave his brothers, if he gave them the food they were asking for without forcing some accountability for what they'd done, they would take advantage of him again. He *chose* to put that fear aside, to live *as if* the deep, joyful generosity of God is the operative force in the universe. As if no matter what happens to us, *we know* that God's purposes in our lives are bigger and stronger than whatever bad or discouraging or unfair thing might happen to us. *Whatever terrible thing happens, God is making something good from it.*

Do you believe that? Can you trust it?

You may have heard me say this before, but today's story reminds me again of this image that has come to me out of the stories I have heard from your lives, and from my life too. It's an image of God walking behind us with a broom and a dustpan, patiently, lovingly, silently

sweeping up all the broken pieces our lives have left behind us. God is picking up all those little pieces, the shards of our hopes and dreams and expectations, and gluing them together into some beautiful mosaic, a picture we never imagined for ourselves. A piece of art very different from the one we set out to create, maybe not at all the one we would have chosen for ourselves. It's a little more humble than the masterpiece we'd imagined our lives would produce. But it is so beautiful...

May it be so. Even now.