

“It’s Prayback Time”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts
February 20, 2022 – The Seventh Sunday after Epiphany
Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

Have you ever experienced life in the pits? If you’re a human, then you most definitely have. Dealing with life’s pits is something that we all experience. We feel heartache when dear loved ones hurt or die and heartbreak when we are scorned or rejected. And there is much else in life that causes us pain, sometimes so much that can feel like we’re stuck in a deep, dark pit.

Today’s story from Genesis features some characters that knew a lot about life in the pits. Joseph, the main character of the story, especially knew about life in the pits because as he literally lived in one, having been thrown into a pit by his not-so-gracious brothers. While he was then lifted out of the pit by his brothers, only to be sold to a band of traveling merchants, who in turn sold him as a slave in Egypt, he experienced the terrible pits of being enslaved, being taken away from his family and anyone else that cared for him, and being taken alone to a distant, foreign land. I wonder what must have gone on in Joseph’s heart and mind during his journey down into these terrible pits.

Thankfully, it is likely that none of us here in this room have experienced anything quite so awful as what Joseph went through. We are aware, however, that countless others throughout history, including many people around the world living today, have lived or are living through similarly awful experiences. Too many people act out of selfishness and greed, like Joseph’s brothers, and do terrible things to others, choosing for their own gain to cause others to suffer terribly. Too many people can relate to Joseph’s story because they have lived it themselves.

But even if you haven’t gone through anything quite as terrible as what Joseph went through, you still know life in the pits. You know what it is to experience loss and to hurt. And you know that sometimes the pain you’ve experienced has been caused by the choices of others, who, at times, have intended to cause you harm. You can relate to Joseph. And you can imagine what he might have been feeling as he traveled toward Egypt.

In today's scripture lesson, we find Joseph, many years later, no longer living as a powerless slave, but as a lofty ruler of the mightiest empire in the region, second in power only to Pharaoh. The tables have turned. Joseph is no longer living in the lowest of pits, but has risen to the highest of heights. His brothers, however, were the lowly ones who came before him, begging for food for themselves and their families, as there was a terrible famine throughout the region, and only Egypt, having been led by the foresight and wisdom of Joseph, had grown and stored enough food to meet and exceed the needs of its people.

But Joseph's brothers, as they came and bowed before him, did not recognize him. Much time had passed between that moment and the one in which they threw him into the pits, and Joseph had grown from being just a child and from a lowly, robeless slave to a fully grown man, a lofty ruler, who was likely festooned with the finest of royal garb and trappings.

When Joseph revealed his true identity to his brothers, you can imagine what they must have felt. Our translation tells us that they were "dismayed" at his presence. You can understand why. They thought that their brother was forever vanquished from their eyes by their own dastardly deeds, and yet here he was before them. They thought he had been made so low, he was nothing, and yet here he was, much more than just something. He was then in the position to cause them great harm in a fitting response to their vile wickedness against him. Joseph was in the position to offer some payback, to give evil for evil, to cause the suffering of his brothers, just as they caused him to suffer.

And yet, for them, it was not payback time. Joseph was no longer a snotty, braggy, technicolor-dreamcoat-wearing kid, but was formed through a lifetime of experiences, many of them very difficult ones, to be a gracious and merciful shepherd of people. And in that moment, he did not offer the just payback of evil for evil or suffering for suffering, but he graciously offered forgiveness and life. In love, he extended an extravagant welcome to those who had cast him out, and through this, he became an agent of God's grace for many in need. And in so doing, the pain that he had endured throughout his lifetime, even the pits into which he was thrown by his brothers, had some purpose. In the words of Joseph, he had gone through all that he had gone through *so that* he could be in a position to offer life.

In this beautiful story of a wronged brother's extravagantly gracious and merciful acts, we are provided with some very important lessons. Joseph teaches us to be similarly gracious and merciful, even to those who have done us wrong, and even to those who successfully *intended* to do us great harm. Instead of seeking and taking advantage of an opportunity for payback, we should offer instead something better: prayback, as Jesus echoed in his "Sermon on the Plain," from which we read in today's gospel reading, we should pray for those who hurt us and we should seek good and not harm for them.

Another lesson is to be mindful of how God is always with us and at work throughout the journeys of our lives, when they lead us to the beautiful vistas in the heights and when they lead us through life's deepest, darkest valleys. God is with us, working in us and working through us at all times, even when we are in the pits. And sometimes, it's *only because* we have been in the pits, that we can be in a place to recognize God's blessings in our lives and to freely offer them to others. Our difficulties can make us more aware of God's provision for us and we can become more sensitive to the needs of others. The pits of life, instead of being meaningless tragedies, can have some meaning as tenderizers of our hearts and pathways to growth that make us more compassionate, loving people who use whatever power we might have to bless others with that which gives life.

Dear friends, never let the pain you've experienced in life, or are experiencing now, to fill you with bitterness and rage, for nothing good ever comes from that. Rather, let your struggles teach you to be more loving as God is loving and you will be a blessing and you will indeed be blessed. Amen.