

The Rev. Dr. David K. McIntosh  
8/16/2020 - 11th Sunday after Pentecost-15 A  
St. Mark's Church, Bridgewater, CT

*Gen 45: 1-15; Psalm 121; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15:10-28*

**'So it was not you who sent me here, but God...'**

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The scriptures today bring to mind the differences between God's ways and human ways, and the often surreal interaction between what is human and what is divine. The passages we just heard, especially from the OT, point out that things are not always what they seem to be, or not always as we'd like them to be. Indeed, the events of the past week, power outages and property damage; and the events of the past several months, the decline of the economy, fear over losing our jobs, and worse yet, fear of illness and losing loved ones because of COVID 19.

Remember your elementary school math classes? The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. The easiest way and most logical way to move between two places is a straight line. And yet, we all know that, in life, it doesn't work out that way. Hills and streams pop up, and our paths must diverge. This is not only true in travel, but in everyday physical, emotional, and spiritual growth. So often our journey in this world involves crooked and twisted lines, deviations from the straight line once intended! Like children learning to write for the first time, our letters are not always smooth and straight, whether from lack of experience, nervousness, or distractions our 'writing' can be messy. Under our hands, that straight line— which represents both our path toward our individual goals, as well as our journey toward God— that straight line we write, becomes crooked. And, as we heard today, **God writes straight with crooked lines**. That is, God uses what is unexpected and even unwanted toward good.

This is wonderfully illustrated in the story from Genesis. We've skipped over a lot from last week, when we heard how Joseph's brothers attacked, almost killed, and sold him into slavery. We skipped the parts about Joseph suffering as a slave in Egypt, being hopelessly imprisoned, until he eventually impressed the Pharaoh to become second in command of the whole kingdom, and how Joseph made sure that Egypt was prepared before famine gripped the land. When famine came, Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain; and they appeared before Joseph, but did not recognize him. We didn't hear how he used his power over them, and through trickery, held Simeon prisoner to get them to return with his favorite brother, Benjamin. Initially, Jacob refused to let Benjamin go, having lost two sons already, but when all the food ran out, he agreed. And so they returned with Benjamin, and once again, Joseph played a strange trick, having a servant hide a silver cup in Benjamin's sack, so that he is able to accuse them of theft. This is where we take up the story in our reading today...

Joseph was that brother whom they stripped and sold as a slave, one written off as dead, and now they look upon him, the great leader among nations, adorned with fine clothes and jewelry... he is not what he seems. And he reveals himself to them. I would imagine they were quite afraid, expecting him to be angry. But he's not angry or bitter, he's joyful and pleased to reconcile with his brothers. Joseph appears to have a remarkable grasp of God's movement in his life, 'it was not you who sent me here, but God.' Having been attacked and betrayed by them, cast out from his own family, you might think Joseph would be full of self-pity and anger, and while the tricks he played on them with regard to the money and silver cup may reflect some anger, he ultimately remained faithful to God. After all, that's why Pharaoh admired him; He remained faithful to who God called him to be. God writes straight with crooked lines.

Through Joseph's actions, we get a glimpse of an affirming theology of suffering. Joseph remains optimistic, focused on the good that came from his brother's evil act, instead of harboring anger over the act itself. "God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth... So it was not you who sent me here, but God." Joseph believed God acted that life rather than death abound, so that the activity of his brothers, though reprehensible, would become a vehicle for good. Because of his own tears and hardships, Joseph felt the need to help others who were suffering, and many lives were saved. God writes straight with crooked lines.

The message is that often good can arise from something bad. Please don't misunderstand me; there has been tremendous theological debate over the centuries about this. And I have devoted many years studying various concepts of 'Theodicy.'— Does God cause bad things to happen? Are natural disasters like storms and hurricanes or terrible illnesses, like COVID and cancer, part of God's plan? Perhaps nature is simply set on a random course involving chance, and life is nothing but a game that some capricious creator set up. Or maybe God is like a puppeteer, pulling the strings in our world?

From the beginning, humans have sought explanations to make sense of this harsh world. We all know and have experienced 'bad things,' like tragedy, hardship, injury and suffering. No, they are not 'good.' And, it's important to realize that God does not cause them or wish them to happen... nor will God 'fix' whatever is wrong and make it right.

Personally, I tend to lean toward 'process theology,' which holds that we—all of creation—are in the process of evolving and changing. God loves all creation, and true love is patient, not forceful (see 1 Corinthians 13). As God has revealed over and over in history, God acts with persuasive love, not coercion, organizing the laws of nature, presenting possibilities to creation, and luring the cosmos toward new modes of being. And throughout this process, God is ever-present and feels everything with us, urging us toward spiritual maturity. God writes straight with crooked lines.

I find this extremely helpful in the midst of the many conflicts in our world— when leaders sound like children, offering arcane and unsafe approaches to common sense problems,

when people throughout the world are suffering from a real pandemic and dying, when our own country is so split that everyone seems bent on hating anyone who disagrees with them. Surrounded by so much evil, I often find myself wondering how the lines we are drawing can ever lead toward good? Like the Canaanite woman in today's Gospel, I want to argue with God! I want to call out injustice, and ask how can we remain faithful children of God?

Back in the summer of 2008, our Anglican Church was experiencing great division and it seemed that our Communion would be broken and we would no longer be in covenant as a gathering of worldwide sister Churches. During the Lambeth Conference that year, Church leaders asked the Chief Rabbi of the British Commonwealth to speak about what it means to be in covenant, and the Jewish teacher used this same story from Genesis to illustrate his point. Listen to what Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks said:

*Instead, Joseph forgives—but he does more than forgive. Listen carefully to his words: You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good, to do what is now being done, to save many lives. Joseph does more than forgive. He says, out of bad has come good. Because of what you did to me, I have been able to save many lives. Which lives? Not just those of his brothers, but the lives of the Egyptians, the lives of strangers. I have been able to feed the hungry. I have been able to honor the covenant of fate—and by honoring the covenant of fate between him and strangers, Joseph is able to mend the broken covenant of faith between him and his brothers. In effect, Joseph says to his brothers: we cannot unwrite the past, but we can redeem that past—if we take our tears and use them to sensitise us to the tears of others.*

What an extraordinary example of a theology that affirms how God works through the pain and evil of this world, to bring good! Despite tragedy and suffering, good does abound.

Consider what Jesus said in today's Gospel, it's not what goes into the mouth but what comes out of it that defiles. It doesn't matter how well we think we've got things planned out, or how certain we are (like the Pharisees) about God's rules, our own righteousness, and God's plan. This world is imperfect, ultimately good, but imperfect. It's not about being 'right,' it comes down to how we act and how we respond when the great plans we've made don't work out the way we expected.

It's up to us to respond affirmatively, as Joseph did. It's up to us to move through life's painful tribulations, not fixated on self-suffering, but focused on what good may come out of those hardships. When we do this, we become partners with God, and move one step closer to that endpoint... and God somehow transforms our crooked handwriting! God writes straight with crooked lines.

