

Epiphany 7C  
Peace, Seattle  
February 24, 2019  
Genesis 45:3-11, Luke 6:27-38

## **THE IMPOSSIBLE POSSIBILITY**

Esther Pauline Friedman came into this world 17 minutes before her sister Pauline Esther Friedman. The identical twins dressed alike, took the same classes, even shared the same purse, with one set of keys, one comb, one lipstick. They slept in the same twin bed. The first time they were separated, in fact, was after their double wedding.

The middle-aged Esther Pauline hooked a job replacing the original Ann Landers at the Chicago Sun Times. Two months later Pauline Esther started her own column with the San Francisco Chronicle calling herself Abigail Van Buren. When Ann sniffed to the Sun-Times that her sister Abby's column was "very imitative," the feud was on. For eight years the two women who had dispensed advice to thousands could not resolve a petty family squabble.<sup>1</sup>

**Sometimes our worst enemies are the members of our own families.  
Sometimes the animosity that builds up between sisters and brothers, between parents and children, between spouses, leaves the deepest and most difficult wounds to heal.**

Today, the climax of the Joseph story from Genesis and Christ's command to "love our enemies" in Luke, show us the stark difference between the ways of the world and the ways of God. These texts challenge us by asking:

- Are you willing to put aside your woundedness in favor of God's mercy?
- Are you willing to forgive the very people you have every right to be angry and resentful about?
- Are you ready to live by a community ethic that calls you to love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you?

These admonitions of Jesus are impossible to fulfill. What he would have us do is the opposite of what the world teaches. It's hard to even imagine what it would be like to live this way. And yet, Christ's words this morning are so crystal clear that we can't simply ignore them.

LOVE YOUR ENEMIES, DO GOOD, AND LEND, EXPECTING NOTHING IN RETURN.  
YOUR REWARD WILL BE GREAT, AND YOU WILL BE CHILDREN OF THE MOST HIGH;  
FOR GOD IS KIND TO THE UNGRATEFUL AND THE WICKED.  
BE MERCIFUL, JUST AS YOUR FATHER IS MERCIFUL.

Child psychiatrist Robert Coles tells the story of Ruby Bridges, a little girl who put him on a new path.<sup>2</sup>

Six-year-old Ruby was one of the first black children to be sent by a judge's order to a school in New Orleans that had previously been all white.<sup>3</sup> Maybe you remember the famous Norman Rockwell painting of her walking to school, flanked in front and behind by two federal marshals.<sup>4</sup>

Each day Ruby endured mobs of people cursing her with every obscenity in the book. White parents, who couldn't fathom racial integration, kept their children at home, so Ruby would enter the school under police protection and all alone, where, met by her teacher, Miss Hurley, she would diligently go about learning how to read, write, and do her arithmetic.

<sup>1</sup> Excerpted from *The New Student Study Bible*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1990) page 64.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Coles. *The Story of Ruby Bridges*. (New York: Scholastic, 1995)

<sup>3</sup> You can find the Disney film based on Ruby's life here: <https://movies.disney.com/ruby-bridges>

<sup>4</sup> You can find the Norman Rockwell painting here: <https://img.washingtonpost.com/1484w/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2011/08/28/Style/Images/normanrockwell.jpg>

One day as she faced the gauntlet on the way into school Miss Hurley noticed that Ruby said something to the crowd. But when she asked Ruby about this, Ruby denied saying anything.

BUT I SAW YOUR LIPS MOVE, RUBY, her teacher said.

I WASN'T TALKING TO THEM Ruby told her. I WAS PRAYING FOR THEM.  
FOR THEM? her teacher asked.

YES. DON'T YOU THINK THEY NEED OUR PRAYERS?  
WHAT DID YOU PRAY FOR? asked Miss Hurley.

I PRAYED WHAT JESUS DID FOR HIS ENEMIES,  
"FATHER, FORGIVE THEM, FOR THEY KNOW NOT WHAT THEY DO."

No one could have demanded of Ruby that she so pray for that vicious mob. Yet she had been brought to worship in her home congregation each week; she had met the God who declared her blessed, and she had come to trust that the love of Jesus had called her into living a new way.

Loving our enemies—the impossible command—becomes possible when we open ourselves to the power of Christ who came among us, who gave himself freely for our sake, who still comes among us in the water, the word, and the meal of forgiveness we will share this morning.

**Our story from Genesis this morning is the climax of the whole Joseph cycle, which began in chapter 37 and ends with chapter 50. Do you remember the story?**

Joseph, age 17, is apple of his father Jacob's eye. Of his twelve sons, Joseph was the clear favorite, and his brothers knew it. Jacob gave Joseph a special coat. He doted on him, and as a result the older brothers seethed with jealousy.

Joseph was also a Dreamer. And in his dreams he—the younger—always came out on top, while his older brothers bowed down to serve him.

Well, his brothers finally get so fed up with Joseph that they hatch a plan to sell him to a caravan of merchants heading for Egypt, and to tell their father that he was attacked and killed by wild animals.

In Egypt Joseph manages to survive the betrayal of his brothers, being cut off from his family, years of servitude. But one day, after false charges land him in prison, Joseph's ship finally comes in.

Using his gift for interpreting dreams, Joseph gains his freedom and lands a job as Pharaoh's right hand man.

A famine is coming, says Joseph, interpreting Pharaoh's dream, and measures must be taken now to prepare the country so that there will be food enough when famine comes. Put in charge by Pharaoh, Joseph does what needs to be done he sets grain aside during the fat years so that when the lean years come, Egypt will be fed.

When the famine finally strikes, and his brothers travel south from Canaan looking for grain, the moment of truth finally arrives. Joseph has them right where he wants them. The dream he'd had years before of them bowing down to him has finally come true.

We wait for Joseph to blast his brothers, to give these scoundrels what they deserve—they who sold him into slavery, who tricked their father into believing he was dead and who'd kept up this charade all these years. **Now, finally, justice is about to be done.**

Unrecognized by his brothers, Joseph tests them, and now he must decide how he will deal with them. Overcome with emotion, he finally reveals his identity to his brothers:

I AM JOSEPH, he tells them, WHO YOU SOLD INTO EGYPT.

Now, if it were Hollywood, this is where Joseph would put his brothers in prison and throw away the key—or at the very least, banish them from Egypt to be sentenced to death by famine.

If it were Hollywood, this is where Joseph would have them shackled and make them serve him and his household for the rest of their lives.

**BUT THIS ISN'T HOLLYWOOD. THIS STORY HAS GOD'S FINGERPRINTS ALL OVER IT.**

Starting with the TRUTH: I AM THE BROTHER YOU SOLD INTO EGYPT—because that's where all movement toward reconciliation and forgiveness must start, with truth telling—Joseph goes on:

DON'T BE ANXIOUS AND ANGRY WITH YOURSELVES, he tells them, FOR GOD SENT ME BEFORE YOU TO PRESERVE LIFE. IT WASN'T YOU WHO SENT ME HERE, BUT GOD.

Joseph's act of forgiveness initiates one of the most moving scenes in the Bible—brothers collapsing into each other's arms, weeping, kissing each other, and begging each other for forgiveness.

As Joseph embraces his brothers and the tears flow, there is a reconciliation that flabbergasts and astounds and turns upside down all the world's rules about justice. Instead of revenge, the verdict is forgiveness.

In the end, Joseph attributes everything to God. The dream about him rising to greatness was never about him in the first place. It was always about God—God standing in the background of human history bringing about God's larger plan and purposes to fruition, saving lives, disrupting plans, effecting change, turning evil purposes to a good end, and keeping promises made generations before: I will make of you a great nation.

**The connection between Joseph's story, and Jesus' sermon in Luke, is unmistakable.**

We are being invited as disciples of Jesus—commanded even—to conform our lives to the ethic of the Kingdom. Trusting that God's larger plan and purposes are unfolding in this world, even when those purposes remain shrouded in mystery, even we can't figure it all out.

**The grace and freedom that comes from such a trusting, allows us to love even our enemies; to put old feuds aside, and to begin again.**

Amen.