

**7 Epiphany  
February 24, 2019**

**In the name of the God of all creation,  
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus.  
And the power of God known in the Spirit.  
Amen.**

A preface to my sermon: As I mention later, this is not the sermon I intended to write when I sat down at my computer yesterday morning. It is as if the Spirit were leading me in a different direction from where I planned to go. Then, after spending several hours writing this sermon, I printed it out and stuffed it in my backpack. However, at 2am this morning I woke with a start ... I had second thoughts ... is this really what I want to say? It is too simplistic? There are too many holes in my reasoning. It just doesn't add up. There is always the other side of the argument. I'm not sure I should preach it as it is.

But, in the end it seems to come down to this. We can either go through life as an optimist, or a pessimist. We can either see the glass half full, or half empty. We can live in abundance, or we can choose scarcity. We can live with courage, or we can live in fear. We can forgive, or we can choose to hold resentments. It is that easy. I choose to be an optimist, seeing the glass half full, living in abundance, with courage, and choosing to forgive. Why would I want to live my life in the shackles of fear, resentment, and scarcity. It is my choice ... this is what I choose.

So, here is the sermon I wrote, even if it wasn't what I intended to write.

Here is my working theology: God created this universe and everything in it ... and God called it good. God created the material, physical, building-blocks of life, as well as everything spiritual. Not only is God in everything ... everything is in God. That is, all of this ... including you and me ... is God. You are a beloved child of God, created in God's image. You are good. Instead of a doctrine of Original Sin, I believe in Original Blessing.

By the mere fact that we are part of God's Creation we have a responsibility to its stewardship. This is not just taking care of the natural world, but stewardship of ourselves, our community life, our shared spiritual universe. We are "called" to contribute in positive ways to make life better ... in this moment ... better than it was a moment ago. We don't always do that. We are often selfish, and think of just ourselves rather than the larger picture. So, we act in ways which we think is "better" for us in the short-term, but is actually not better for the greater Creation. The Church calls this sin. Personally, I don't really like the word "sin" because it carries lots of baggage. For me, "sin" simply means whatever action that takes away from God's Creation ... is a detriment to God's Creation ... subtracts from God's Creation rather than adds to it.

Of course, I started my adult life as a mathematician. So adding and subtracting works for me as a metaphor. Simply put, when we act in ways that contribute to God's Creation ... making it better in this moment than it was a moment ago ... we are being faithful stewards. When we act in ways that either don't improve the situation, or actually leave us in a worse place ... we are not living into our responsibility.

The fact is that we all do both ... all the time. I'm talking about big and little acts. I'm talking about trying to save the planet from global warming on the one hand ... an effort to make the world better today than it was yesterday. And, on the other hand, the destruction of whole mountains and their eco-system in search of coal because it is profitable ... obviously a disregard for God's Creation. But, I'm also talking about those small acts we do every day. Looking at a stranger in the eyes and saying "Hello" is an action that recognizes and affirms the other as a fellow child of God ... and it contributes to God's Creation. Making a joke at someone else's expense ... even if they are not present ... takes away from God's Creation.

This isn't new thinking. It has been around in many cultures since the beginning of time. Religions around the world are based on this premise ... even if they use different words and call God by different names. In our own Judeo-Christian understanding we have the Bible to outline the evolution of these ideas. Moses and the Ten Commandments tell us what to do to contribute to God's Creation, and what not to do ... that list of "Thou shalt not ..." that takes away from God's Creation. The Book of Deuteronomy also contains 613 Mitzvot that expand upon the Ten Commandments ... rules that tell us which situations and actions add to God's Creation, and those that subtract from God's Creation.

Then there are the prophets. The prophets called people to account for acting in ways that did not contribute to a better world, and they gave people options to change their behaviors so that they might become "givers" rather than "takers." They also held people accountable for their apathy ... if you are not contributing, your non-action is as good as taking from God's Creation ... there are no free rides. Lead, Follow, or Get Out of the Way!

When Jesus came along he lived, taught and died a life that was always contributing to God's Creation. By his actions he made the world a better place than it was a moment before he acted. In his teachings, he taught others how to do the same. In his death he both showed the people around him, and taught the world, that there are somethings worth dying for ... that they are so valuable a part of God's Creation that they will live on even after death has killed the body. God's Resurrection of Jesus contributed to God's Creation in a way no other action could. Two thousand years later, we who take seriously what Jesus took seriously are doing our best to live a Resurrected life as our contribution to God's Creation.

At this point, I will have to admit that this is not where I thought this sermon was going to go when I started writing. However, it was in reading the lessons this morning that the Spirit seemed to push my mind in this direction.

First of all, I love the story of Joseph and his brothers. This is the tipping point of a long saga. The story goes back to Isaac and Rebekah who had twin boys, Esau who was born first, and Jacob who came out of the womb holding on to Esau's heel. They were an odd pair ... Esau the hunter, and Jacob the homebody. Esau was Isaac's favorite, and Jacob was Rebekah's favorite. Esau, being the older of the twins, had the family's birthright. As Isaac was growing old Rebekah and Jacob tricked Isaac into giving Jacob the blessing of the birthright that actually belonged to Esau. As anyone would imagine this angered Esau ... and so Jacob had to run away to save his life.

Jacob ended up in exile in a "far land" where he found shelter with Rebekah's uncle, Laban. Laban had two daughters, Leah ... the older ... and Rachel ... the prettier of the two. Jacob fell in love with Rachel and made a deal with Laban to work seven years so he could have Rachel for his wife. Seven years later there was a great marriage feast, Jacob got drunk, and in the morning woke up to find Leah in his bed rather than Rachel ... he had been duped by Laban. Not to be undone, Jacob worked another seven years for Rachel's hand ... and, in a feat of genetic manipulation recorded in the Bible, Jacob turned the table on Laban and hoodwinked Laban out of all of his sheep.

So now Jacob had two wives, and lots and lots of sheep. He also had lots of children ... ten boys by Leah, two boys by Rachel, and at least one girl. (Remember, the story is being told by men in a male dominated culture, so women didn't get much press.) Anyhow, Jacob's favorite son was Joseph ... one of the two children born to Rachel (the other was Benjamin). Joseph was such a favorite that his father and mother would dress him in robes of bright colors. This special treatment of Joseph infuriated his brothers.

So, one day, when Joseph was with his brothers out tending the flocks of sheep, the brothers decided to take action. They threw Joseph into a pit and left him to die. Then they poured sheep's blood on his robes so they could tell Jacob that he had been killed by the wolves. However, before they could leave the scene, along came a caravan carrying spices and perfumes destined for Egypt. Seeing the chance for remuneration, the brothers pulled Joseph out of the pit and sold him into slavery.

Joseph ended up as a slave in Egypt, but he had a special talent ... a gift ... of interpreting dreams, and this won him favor with the Pharaoh. This is how Joseph became somewhat of a bigwig in Egypt. So years go by, and a famine occurred in the homeland of his brothers, and they all went down to Egypt begging for relief supplies. This is where the reading picks up this morning. The brothers were meeting with the Prime Minister of Egypt, but they did not recognize that this Prime Minister was their own brother Joseph who they had sold into slavery.

Joseph could very easily have held onto resentment for the betrayal of his brothers. He could have dealt out retribution to those who had sold him into shackles. Instead, he chose to forgive. He knew what shackles were like ... he had lived in them. Instead of being bound by chains to feelings that took away from God's Creation, he chose to forgive ... and add to God's

Creation. He not only broke the bonds of his own feelings, he broke the long history of dysfunction in his family.

Wow! A story full of deceit, deception, lies, manipulation, jealousy, even attempted murder ... a really dysfunctional family ... all for the sake of one story about forgiveness and reconciliation. Really? Yes. Because that's the way God works. Because that is what God wants. In spite of all that we can do to take away from God's Creation ... all we can do to separate ourselves from God ... God wants us to contribute to God's Creation and forgiveness and reconciliation is one of those ways ... a big way.

In Paul's First Letter to the Christians gathered in Corinth he tries to explain to them about the Resurrection. And he has these words:

*The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; and as is the man of heaven, so are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we will also bear the image of the man of heaven.*

The fact is that we are all made of that same dust ... the same dust that came from the Big Bang ... the same dust that is the God of Creation. Oh, sure, we are each molded differently, but, at the most base level we are all that same stardust. And, that stardust is God.

Finally, in our reading from the Gospel of Luke we hear more of the Sermon on the Plain ... "plain" as in flat or level place. Jesus is channeling the teachings of his Jewish roots, but with a twist. Most people thinking of doing the "right" thing so we can somehow earn credit for "good" works ... like it will be in the "Big Book" at Heaven's Gate for St. Peter to check before entrance. That is some of the "baggage" I was referring to about the word "sin." In my view, credit for "good" works is like trying to fill a bottomless pit ... so what?

In spite of Jesus' use of the word "credit," as in "what credit is that to you?" (three times in the reading this morning) there is something much deeper ... and it has to do with changing ... transforming ... that which is a detriment to God's Creation into a contribution. When Joseph forgives his brothers, he reframes the horrible events of his life to include the redemptive artistry of God: "God sent me before you to preserve life." To be clear: this doesn't mean that God willed Joseph's brothers to abuse and abandon him. I don't believe that abuse is ever God's will or plan for any of his children. Rather, what Joseph is saying is that God is always and everywhere in the business of taking the worst things that happen to us, and going to work on them for the purposes of multiplying wholeness and blessing ... contributing to God's Creation. The story of Joseph began generations before he was even born. However, because God is in the story, we can rest assured that it will not end in loss and trauma. There will be another turn, another chapter, another path, another grace. As Jesus promises his listeners, the measure we give will be given back to us: "A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over." Because God loves us, we don't have to forgive out of scarcity. We can forgive out of God's amazing abundance.

Let me end with a portion of a sermon by Lutheran minister Nadia Bolz-Weber. Bolz-Weber, after describing abuse, betrayal, and mistreatment as a chain that binds us, writes stunningly about the power of forgiveness.

“Maybe retaliation or holding onto anger about the harm done to me doesn’t actually combat evil. Maybe it feeds it. Because in the end, if we’re not careful, we can actually absorb the worst of our enemy, and at some level, start to become them. So what if forgiveness, rather than being a pansy way to say, ‘It’s okay,’ is actually a way of wielding bolt-cutters, and snapping the chains that link us? What if it’s saying, ‘What you did was so not okay, I refuse to be connected to it anymore.’? Forgiveness is about being a freedom fighter. And free people are dangerous people. Free people aren’t controlled by the past. Free people laugh more than others. Free people see beauty where others do not. Free people are not easily offended. Free people are unafraid to speak truth to stupid. Free people are not chained to resentments. And that’s worth fighting for.”

I pray that we will take up the hard work of taking seriously what Jesus took seriously for the sake of both wholeness and justice ... contributing to God’s Creation. I believe it is the most important work we can do for the life of the world. May we loosen the chains that bind us. May we rise. And may we ... in God's time ... taste the full measure of the freedom God offers us.

Amen.