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KIND OF LIKE A WATER FOUNTAIN

Genesis 50:15-21

In this sermon series we are considering some of the difficulties we have to overcome to survive in life. In the last couple of weeks we thought about turmoil and disappointment. As I reflected on the subject for today I recalled 2 things from my youth that, though minor, even trivial, made clear to me that there is an issue that we will be faced with. One of those was a teacher in high school who for some reason, surely no fault of mine, seemed to dislike me. She blamed repeatedly for things that happened that weren’t my fault. She did not treat me fairly.

The other thing was a very insignificant incident that happened my freshman freshman year in college. I was trying to play on the baseball team, but mostly I was practicing and watching games from the bench. I probably got to start two games the whole year, and usually only got into a game if it was a total blowout. But that year I had one of the most memorable at bats of all my years playing baseball. We got absolutely destroyed in this particular game, so late in the game the coach put me in, figuring no matter how badly I played I couldn’t make it any worse than it already was. I only got one at bat. I came up with 2 outs in the 9th inning with no one on base, and we were losing 12-0. Not exactly what they call a high leverage situation. The count got to 2 balls and 2 strikes. The pitcher threw a fastball that I thought was outside, but that didn’t matter much because it was also very low, right down around my shoe tops. This wouldn’t even have been a strike to my little one year old grandson, Wesley, and his strike zone is down very close to the ground. It was an obvious pitch to let go by. I knew it was going to run the count to 3-2. I was totally shocked when the umpire called out, “Strike three, you’re out, the game is over.” I whirled around in shock and said to him, “You’ve got to be kidding! That wasn’t even close to a strike.” He took off his mask and said, “It’s late. This game is long over. I just want to go home.” He didn’t even pretend to defend his call as a legitimate strike. It was definitely the worst strike call against me that I ever experienced. Unfortunately, I was the only person at the ball park who cared. Every other person there agreed with the umpire. It was late. That game was over, and they just wanted to go home. Even my own coach and teammates would have said the same thing. But it mattered to me.

The problem for me was that I got very few opportunities that year to convince the coach that I could actually play and should get more game time. While to everybody else that final at bat of the game was utterly irrelevant, it was huge to me. It was a precious chance to do something to make the coach take notice. That umpire unfairly took my opportunity from me. He unjustly stole it from me because he wanted to be done for the day. I felt mistreated, cheated and I was outraged. It wasn’t right. Of course, looking back on it I realize that incident was utterly trivial. I wasn’t getting much playing time because I wasn’t very good. I was never going to be a good baseball player, and that one at bat wasn’t going to change that. But you all know the sense of outrage when you are treated unfairly. That has been an issue that has nearly torn our nation apart in the past year. I have been poorly treated by other people over the years in much more important ways, but for some reason that moment stands out vividly in my memory.

All of us are going to go through experiences where we are treated badly or unfairly by others, even mistreated by them. When you live in a world filled with fallen people that is inevitable. It is frustrating and angering when that happens to us, and we want to get back at those who hurt us. Life is not fair. When I coached my son’s hockey teams when he was young one of my sayings was, “bad calls are part of the game.” They we’re going to happen, you just have to overcome them. The same is true of life. When we are treated unfairly we think it will make us feel better if we can vent our anger, if we can get even, if we can make them feel something of the pain they’ve inflicted on us. Letting that feeling take control has a long history in the human race. An eye for an eye seems right and fair.

Unfortunately that is also the source of an enormous amount of violence, pain and damage among human beings. And sadly, it usually makes things worse. Today we are going to think about how to respond when we are treated badly or unfairly. We will look at the example of someone who knew all about that. The climax of his story is found in Genesis 50:15-21.

JOSEPH WAS HORRIBLY MISTREATED

Joseph’s story is familiar. He was one of the 12 sons of Jacob. Jacob fathered those sons with 4 different women, but he most loved Rachel above the rest. She had been unable to bear children and watched as the other women produced 10 sons. Then, after years of frustration and disappointment, she finally became pregnant and had a baby boy. She named him Joseph. Because he was the son of Jacob’s favorite wife he became Jacob’s favorite son. Rachel would eventually have another son, but she died giving birth to him.

Joseph, unfortunately, was like any naive young man who has favored status, and took it as a given. It just seemed natural to him, and he naively assumed others would feel the same. But his brothers didn’t. They didn’t like it at all. Jacob’s preferential treatment of Joseph galled them. Joseph’s attitude, though it was not his intent, actually rubbed their faces in it. They eventually decided they’d had enough. They plotted to solve the problem by removing Joseph from the board. They’d just kill him, then they wouldn’t have to put up with being second class.

A little bit of sense, though not much, intervened. Genesis 37:26-27 says, “Judah said to his brothers, ‘What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.’ His brothers agreed.” As much as he annoyed them, they were uneasy with murdering their own brother and that stopped them. Instead of killing him they sold him to human traffickers. How sweet. I suspect at least a part of the reason for that was, as Judah said, killing him would not be profitable. Selling him to slave traders netted them some money so they killed two birds with one stone. They got rid of Joseph and made money. A win-win.

What ensued in Joseph’s life was awful. He was sold as a slave in Egypt. He worked hard and kept his head down and eventually became the slave his wealthy owner trusted most. But the wealthy owner’s wife wanted Joseph to sleep with her. He refused, so she falsely accused Joseph of attempting to rape her. He had tried to do the right thing, and his reward for that was prison, where he languished for years. Joseph eventually came to Pharaoh’s attention. He was released from prison and became the second most powerful man in Egypt. But nothing could ever restore those lost years, years of slavery and imprisonment. Nothing could restore the years of being separated from his family. Neither could anything ever heal the hurt of being rejected and so hated by his own brothers that their debate over what to do with him came down to kill him or sell him as a slave. That is a pain one would never forget.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away, no, wait, it wasn’t another galaxy, it was another ministry, I was stabbed in the back openly by a couple of men I considered friends. It’s been a long time since that happened, and I still remember how that felt. Can you imagine how Joseph must have felt about being betrayed by his own brothers, who did very real and very serious harm to him?

What is the usual response to that kind of betrayal and harm? A number of years ago the *Chicago Tribune* had an article that told the story of a young Israeli girl who was killed in the eye-for-an-eye fighting that occurred in Hebron, in Israel, the kind that continues to this day. This beautiful, innocent little girl was shot while she was just sitting in a stroller. There is now a poem on a wall near where she was killed, that describes how precious she was. Then it says, “We will take revenge. We will scream for revenge in body and spirit.” That is human nature. An ugly wrong is committed, and the victim strikes back to even the score. No one, and I mean no one, would have blamed Joseph for using the power of his exalted position to pay back the evil his brothers had done.

JOSEPH TOOK A ROAD MUCH LESS TRAVELED

The world offers so many opportunities for us to feel mistreated, to be offended or hurt by other people. A couple of years ago Laurie got to fulfill one of her bucket list items. We were on the Big Island of Hawaii. There is a resort there that has a program that offers the opportunity to swim with dolphins. Laurie has always wanted to do that, so as a gift to her I arranged for her to participate in that program. At the designated day and time we checked her in at a counter there by the lagoon where the young woman employee had her fill out a bunch of paper work. When Laurie was done the girl said, “Do you need a locker?” Laurie looked stunned. She didn’t say a word. She stood there looking like she’d been poleaxed. I didn’t know what was going on with her, but her lack of response was bordering on rude, so I jumped in. I said, “She’s fine. She won’t need a locker. I’ll be her locker and take care of her stuff.” The girl said that would be fine and Laurie was all set to go. As we walked a way Laurie started laughing. I said, “How come you didn’t answer her about the locker?” She said, “I thought she asked if I needed a walker. I didn’t think I looked that old.”

Laurie might conceivably have taken offense at what she thought the girl had said to her. Fortunately she was too surprised to say anything, and it’s not in her nature to be snarky even if the girl had said that. But people do take offense, and their natural reaction is to shoot back. As we have seen, that’s what we would have expected of Joseph. I envision him during dark nights as a slave, during his long days and nights as a prisoner unfairly incarcerated, imagining the time when he might somehow confront his cruel brothers. I can see him fantasizing about ways to inflict the maximum pain on them for their despicable actions. I suspect all of us have at times dreamed up scenarios at how we could get back at people who have hurt us.

Joseph had the perfect chance to exact revenge. Now in a position of power, he was stunned when his brothers showed up before him, begging for help. A famine had struck, and they had heard there was food in Egypt. They went there to see if there was some way they could obtain food and keep their families alive. And the guy in charge of the food was Joseph, though they did not recognize him. He was the last person they expected to see as the Vice Pharaoh of Egypt. They were totally at his mercy. He could have told them they could grovel all they wanted, but they were going to get what they deserved, which was exactly no food, and maybe some deadly punishment ordered by the Big Honcho.

But as we see in this passage, Joseph did not do that. He didn’t berate them for how they had treated him. He didn’t punish them. He didn’t seek revenge in any way. Even in this incident in Genesis 50 it is obvious they haven’t really changed. Joseph had revealed himself to his brothers on an earlier occasion and told them he intended to help them and not harm them. But Joseph’s father, Jacob, was still alive when that happened. They feared that Joseph was playing a waiting game. He loved his father, who been shattered by what he thought was the loss of Joseph. The brothers apparently feared that Joseph was only restraining himself out of love and respect for his father.

But now Jacob had died. All bets were off. In verse 15 the brothers say to each other, “What if Joseph holds a grudge against us and pays us back for all the wrongs we did to him?” They were afraid that was going to happen because that’s exactly what they would have done. There’s an incident in Genesis 34 that reveals much about Joseph’s brothers. The brothers had a sister named Dinah. At one point she was raped by a man named Shechem. That was horrible, but in this instance at least Shechem actually did love Dinah and wanted to marry her. He wanted to make the situation as right as it could have been in that culture. The brothers used his desire for her. They said they’d agree to let Dinah marry him if every man in the town got circumcised. Amazingly, Shechem and his father, who were apparently the big men in town, convinced everyone to go along. All the men in the town underwent circumcision. A couple of days later as all the men in town were recovering from their procedures, two of the brothers went through the town and killed every man in it, because they were helpless to defend themselves. That was the brothers’ mind set. One of you rapes our sister, then we kill every man in your town. They figured Joseph would be operating on that same basis.

So the brothers cook up a scheme they hope will protect them. Verses 16-17 say, “So they sent word to Joseph, saying, ‘Your father left these instructions before he died. “This is what you are to say to Joseph. I ask you to forgive your brothers the sins and the wrongs they committed in treating you so badly.” Now please forgive the sins of the servants of the God of your father.’” Hey, it could have happened. Jacob could have said that. They didn’t say, “We should tell Joseph what Dad said about forgiving us.” They made this whole thing up as a way of trying to protect themselves. Verse 17 tells us when he got their message, Joseph wept. Why? I’m pretty sure it’s because he saw through the whole thing. He knew they were still scheming and were scared to death that he was like them.

Instead of what they might expect, Joseph said, “Don’t be afraid.” He went on to say, “I will provide for you and your children.” Verse 21 says he reassured them and spoke kindly to them! He cared for them, he provided for them, he reassured them, and he encouraged them with his words. This is unexpected and awesome.

Joseph was practicing something Jesus would later teach. In Matthew 5:38 Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’” This actually was a limiting law. The way things worked in ancient times was illustrated by the incident involving Dinah. You rape our sister, then we kill every man in your town. The principle was, you do anything damaging to me and I will do ten times worse back to you. That’s how people operated. Eye for an eye said the punishment should be proportional to the crime. Perhaps death should be a penalty for rape, but it should be the death of just the perpetrator, not the entire town. So an eye for an eye seemed like a measured and fair proposition.

But Jesus took things way beyond that. In Matthew 5:44 he said, “But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” That’s the kind of response Joseph embodied. He took care of people who were more than deserving of any punishment he could come up with for them. He loved those who had severely harmed him. Jesus wants us to follow Joseph’s example. He wants us to respond to unfairness and mistreatment with love.

APPLICATION

This is a radical idea. It is rarely practiced, but imagine how it would change the world if people lived like this. But this is unnatural and hard. Injustice and unfair treatment create a seemingly irresistible desire to get back at the perpetrators. It makes it extremely hard to let go of what has been done to us. What can help us respond as Jesus taught? There are some things in this passage that show us the way to do that, things that will be of great help to us.

DON’T TRY TO TAKE GOD’S PLACE

In verse 19 Joseph said to his brothers, “Don’t be afraid. Am I in the place of God?” His point is that God is the only true Judge. He is the only being in existence who is absolutely good, just and fair, the only one who knows everything, even the thoughts and hearts of people. He is the one who will hold people accountable, who will punish wrongs and reward what is right and good.

Joseph said he would not put himself in God’s place. He refused to take over the role of punisher of wrongs. He would leave that to the only one who can exercise it properly and fairly. There is a truth that is hard for us to grasp. It is that we cannot judge fairly what other people do to us. Our thinking is too heavily influenced by our obsession with self. Our justice system recognizes this. Imagine that a company sues another company for a lot of money. The suit goes to court. It turns out that the judge is a major stock holder of the company that is being sued. What happens? He must remove himself from his role as judge, he must recuse himself, because there is no way he can be fair when he has a financial interest in the case.

I saw the fallacy of human beings judging others in a football game not long ago. The Tampa Bay Buccaneers were playing the Green Bay Packers in a conference championship game with the winner going to the Super Bowl. There was a key play where Tampa Bay needed a first down, but on the third down play they threw an incomplete pass. It seemed they had lost their chance. But wait, a penalty was called. One of the Green Bay defensive backs was called for holding, giving Tampa a first down. Green Bay fans were livid. It was a bad call. The refs had been letting defensive backs play very physically all day, now they call a penalty. It was obvious they were favoring Tom Brady. But the replay was very clear. The holding was blatant. On the replay you could see the defensive back holding the jersey of the receiver. The receiver was trying to run his route but the DB clearly was holding him back by clutching his jersey. The Green Bay fans mostly didn’t accept it. But in that situation as an objective observer with no horse in the race, it was clear to me that if I’ve ever seen defensive holding in a game, this was it. The ref had to call it. Green Bay fans had a hard time admitting it, because it went against what they wanted. We just have a hard time being objective.

When we hold a grudge, when we resent those who have mistreated us, when we seek to get even, to hurt them back, we are putting ourselves in God’s place. We need to remember what happened in Eden when humans decided they wanted to take God’s place. Evil always results. Terrible evil. We don’t bring about true justice. James 1:20 says, “Human anger does not produce the righteousness that God desires.” Our efforts to bring about justice when we are injured by others will never bring about true justice. Romans 12:19 says, “Do not take revenge, my dear friends, but leave room for God’s wrath, for it is written, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay, says the Lord.’” It is the Lord’s job to avenge. Not ours. When we seek to avenge what others do to us, we try to take over God’s job. We will never do it as fairly or as effectively as he will, and we are putting ourselves in God’s place. That’s a terrible thing to do.

This comes down to a question of faith. Do we believe that God really will judge and do so effectively? If he will, then we can know that no one will ever get away with anything. We relieve ourselves of a huge burden by letting him deal with the problem. Does it feel to you like someone has been unfair to you? If so, the question is, do you think God can handle it? If you don’t, you have a big problem. We all do. But if you do, then all you will do if you try to handle the issue is to get in the way. So let God deal with it.

You’ve seen this before if you watched a football game. A player is hit by an opposing player way after the whistle has blown. He is angry and jumps up ready to hit back, when he sees a referee throwing his flag. At that point he stops. The ref, the arbiter of football justice, has seen the wrong and by throwing the flag indicated that he will deal with it. The wronged player will only make things worse by retaliating, so he does nothing. The ref, then does, indeed, make the other player pay by imposing a penalty on his team. Whenever you feel you have been wronged by someone, imagine God throwing his flag on the play. He’s going to deal with it. Your retaliation will only make things worse.

COUNT ON GOD’S GOOD PLAN

Verse 20 has some of the most profound words in the Old Testament. Joseph told his brothers, “You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.” Joseph saw that had his brothers not taken those evil actions and sold him to slave traders, he never would have been in Egypt, he never would have arrived at the lofty position he was in, and he would not have been able to help his family. They very possibly might have starved to death. Not only would that have been a tragedy for his family, we know something that Joseph didn’t, which was that would have been the end of God’s plan to rescue the human race through the Jewish people.

What Joseph’s brothers did was utterly wrong. It was evil. It was a sin against Joseph and against God. Yet God used their sin, their heartless disobedience to God, to accomplish his will! This is the astounding truth about God. He can and does take horrible things that people do, things that are totally against his will, and somehow uses them to accomplish exactly what he wants to accomplish!

The most profound example of that is the religious leaders of Israel opposing Jesus, their Messiah. They rejected him in complete rebellion against God’s will. It was a rejection so total that they plotted and worked to see to it that he would be killed. In so doing they accomplished exactly what God had revealed would happen through the prophet Isaiah hundreds of years earlier. God’s son had to die as a sacrifice for the human race, and their rejection of God’s provision for them brought that about.

While I was in grad school I was convinced by a colleague to quit the job I had and come work for him. He said I would have better pay and I could fit the hours to suit my school schedule, which had been a problem at my previous job. So I quit that job at a grocery store and went to work for him. But I was to eventually learn he wasn’t always completely ethical. I didn’t make anywhere near the money he said I would, and he pulled a few other stunts that were just unfair. He did not treat me or his other employees as he should have. His unfairness led me to quit working for him, which through a chain of events over the next year landed me in the place where on July 2, 1978, I met a young lady named Laurie Bingham, a landmark event in my life that would become the greatest blessing I have on this earth. God used someone doing something not in line with his will to lead me to encounter the woman who became my wife. Through that guy’s unfair treatment of me, God accomplished the biggest blessing of my life!

We have to ask ourselves, is God sovereign, is he good, and does he love us? The biblical answer to all of those questions is yes. If that is true, then nothing humans do to us is going to stop God’s sovereign, good and loving plan from playing out in our lives.

BE AN INSTRUMENT OF GRACE

Joseph saw himself as an instrument of God’s good plan. What mattered was not the terrible things that had been done to him, but that he was used to further God’s plan. To that end, seeing himself as God’s instrument, instead of treating his brothers as enemies, he provided for them and their families, and he spoke kindly to them. He tried to encourage them and help them feel better.

Miroslav Volf, the Croatian theologian and Yale University professor, said, “To triumph fully, evil needs two victories, not one. The first victory happens when an evil deed is perpetrated; the second victory, when evil is returned. After the first victory evil would die if the second victory did not infuse it with new life.” Evil died in Joseph’s life because he refused to give it that second victory by returning evil for evil.

There is a history among God’s people that we sometimes fail to notice and learn from. David suffered for years because Saul was jealous of him and threatened by him. Saul pretty much lost his mind and irrationally made trying to kill David his top goal, even though David was completely loyal to him. In 1 Samuel 24 while trying to hunt David down, Saul wandered into a cave. Unbeknown to him David was in that cave. David could easily have done what Saul feared and accused David of wanting to do, and killed him. After Saul left the cave David came out and told him that he, David, could easily have killed him. In verse 12 he said, “May the Lord judge between you and me. And may the Lord avenge the wrongs you have done to me, but my hand will not touch you.” David was hounded for no reason at all, but he refused to take matters into his own hand to resolve the problem. Jeremiah suffered throughout his life for obeying God. Paul suffered for doing nothing wrong, but despite all that happened to him he only tried to honor God and bring grace to others. The prime example, of course, is the Lord Jesus, who was utterly sinned against, yet even as he was dying prayed, “Father forgive them.”

1 Peter 2:20-21 says, “If you suffer for doing good and you endure it, this is commendable before God. To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example that you should follow in his footsteps.” As a follower of Christ, you are called to suffer for doing good! That’s what Jesus did, and we are to be like him. We are to give grace to others, even when they are unfair or unkind to us.

The movie *Munich*, was based on true events that began with the 1972 Olympics. During those games Palestinian terrorists took 11 Israeli athletes hostage, and eventually murdered them. Israel responded by sending a small squad of unlikely operatives to track down the perpetrators and kill them all. One by one they killed the terrorists, but the team begins having doubts about what they are doing. Some of them feel like they look no different than the terrorists because some innocents are being killed as collateral damage. In one scene the team leader, Avner, is confronted by Robert, the explosives expert. Robert says, “We’ve killed 9 men. And how many others died in Beirut? All this blood comes back to us.” Avner says, “Eventually it will work. Even if it takes years. We’ll beat them.” Robert says, “We’re Jews, Avner. We don’t do wrong because our enemies do wrong.” Avner says, “We can’t afford to be that decent anymore.” Robert answers, “I don’t know that we were ever that decent. Suffering thousands of years of hatred doesn’t make you decent. But we’re supposed to be righteous. That’s what I was taught. That’s Jewish. That’s a beautiful thing…And I think I’ve lost that, Avner.” Then he goes on to say, “That’s everything. I’ve lost everything. My, my soul.”

That is what followers of Messiah are to be like. We don’t do wrong because others do wrong. We’re supposed to be righteous. We are supposed to give grace to others regardless of what they may do. Ephesians 4:32 says, “Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.” We are to see ourselves as dispensers of grace in every circumstance with every person.

I’ve noticed a few fast food outlets that have a different kind of soda dispenser. We’re used to the fountain where it has maybe 6 or 8 different spigots, one for each drink the restaurant offers. This new kind of machine just has one spigot, but on the front is a touch screen. On the screen are icons for every kind of drink the restaurant has. You just touch the icon for the drink you want, whether it be Coke, or 7-Up, or tea or lemonade, and so on. Then you put your cup under the spigot and out comes the requested drink. Compare that with a water fountain. You will only get water out of it, because that is all it dispenses. Which do you think we are to be like? Do we dispense different things depending on what the situation calls for, kindness, anger, defensiveness, resentment, grace, and so on? I submit God wants us to be like that water fountain. We are to dispense just one thing. We are to dispense grace. No matter what the situation, no matter what the provocation, what is going to come out is grace. That is exactly what we see in Joseph in this incident.

That is not natural for us. It is highly uncharacteristic of humans, and it often is very hard. We don’t have it naturally inside of us, so if we just depend on what we can manufacture, we will not be able to dispense grace in every situation. In order for a fountain to dispense water, it has to have a source of water. It has a line that taps into a water supply. For us to dispense grace we need a source. We need to continually tap into God’s grace for us. If we are filled with grace from God, when we are pushed, no matter what the situation, what will come out is grace.