

John Docherty, September 17, 2017

Abounding in steadfast love

The theme for today's service, is “Abounding in steadfast love”. This would also typically be the time of year when we would try to formally welcome new faces in our circle. It's the start of a new academic year, and the gearing up of a new cycle in our church life as we shift gears from the summer season.

So I decided that in my meditation today I would try to bridge those two thrusts, and explore the theme of steadfast love while also trying to give the newer faces in our circle a bit of an introduction to who we are here at MFM.

And I hope to be able to do that without scaring you off.

The story we read of Joseph forgiving his brothers is offered as an example of the kind of love God shows towards us – a love that is merciful, forgiving, and abundant.

The passage we read from the Gospel of Matthew carries this idea forward in terms of how we are expected to live out this model of forgiving love.

The idea of “abundant love” is familiar enough in Christian circles. One of the first songs children tend to learn in Church is “Jesus loves me”, and it includes, among other things, the observation that “little ones to him belong, they are weak but he is strong”.

So from very early on, we're introduced to a God who is overflowing with care and protection for the “little ones” among us. We *belong* to God, and God loves us. God *cares* about us.

The idea of forgiveness is also part and parcel of the core of what it means to be Christian – we are ourselves forgiven in God's eyes, and are expected to pay forward that forgiveness.

But, as anyone who has ever been hurt, or felt attacked by others, knows, forgiveness is a challenge. It's not *easy* to forgive, especially if we understand forgiveness to mean that we simply accept what's been done to us and adopt an attitude of “that's okay, it's no big deal, I'll get over it” ...

Well, sometimes it *is* a big deal. Sometimes the hurts are too deep, and too painful to dismiss their effects on us (anger, frustration, sadness, grief ...) as being unworthy of a good Christian. Open wounds may eventually heal on their own if they're ignored, but at best they'll leave a nasty and permanent scar that's obvious to everybody; or, at worst, they'll fester and become inflamed, and end up infecting the entire body with their poison.

So how do we find the strength / patience / courage / will to forgive when we've been hurt deeply?

Last year when Michael Lapsley was here, I suggested that one approach to the idea of “forgiving and forgetting” is to shift our understanding of these words a little by breaking them down into their component parts and then taking them to mean that we “refuse to *'give'* to the other what has been given to us” - in other words, we refuse to return evil for evil – we *'for'*give the act;

and that we “refuse to let the hurt *'get'* in the way of our relationships with others” - we *'for'*get the effects of the act that has hurt us.

Today, I'd like to look at the story of Joseph and his brothers as another path to finding the wherewithal to work at restoring relationships damaged by hurt and betrayal; and I'd like to address that specifically when the hurt happens in a circle like this one here at MFM ... a circle of tight community with strong bonds of friendship and mutual accountability.

And I'd like to address it from that perspective, because some people who choose to attend a particular church do so simply because it's nearby; it may be related to their denominational affiliation; or they may have been hurt or alienated by another church community and they're hoping to find a place where they feel more comfortable – where they feel they belong, and where the hurts of the past can be healed.

First, the dynamics at play in the story of Joseph and his brothers are family dynamics.

That word - family - speaks of a blood relationship, an identity link, a bond of loyalty. It is these elements that make us intimately linked to each other.

I know that I'm the brother of my sister because we're born of the same mother and the same father.

I know that I'm the brother of my sister because we share the same blood, the same DNA.

I know that I'm the brother of my sister because we grew up in the same house, with the same memories of family activities, with the same moments of joy and the same fights.

But when we speak of family dynamics, we speak sometimes of wounds, of wrongs, of rupture.

Every family goes through this. Our relationships as members of the same family are complicated. The sense of belonging that makes us proud of our brothers and sisters, and proud to be a member of the same family, also makes the fights within the family sometimes produce much deeper injuries than those produced by a falling out with a friend or neighbor.

In the verses we read from the book of Genesis, for example, we see the last phases of a very serious family break. We see in these verses the reconciliation between Joseph and his brothers - following years of separation – we're witnesses of the "re-creation" of the bonds of brotherhood.

What we do *not* see in these verses are the roots of this rupture; The conflicts that produced the situation that finally ended with this scene of reconciliation.

If you know Joseph's story a little, you know that he was sold as a slave by his brothers, and that the merchants who bought him transported him to Egypt, the place of this eventual reconciliation.

You know, perhaps, that once arrived in Egypt, he becomes a great noble; the right hand of the pharaoh; responsible for the management of the country.

If you know Joseph's story *very* well, you also know that the root of this jealousy and hatred on the part of his brothers goes back to chapter 37 of Genesis.

At the beginning of *that* chapter we read that Joseph used to report to his father the bad things about his brothers ... not hard to believe that his brothers didn't much appreciate the tattle-taleing little brother.

But worse still, he had dreams, and in his dreams he had visions of a future in which all his family would prostrate themselves before him ... not hard to believe that his brothers didn't care much for *that* either.

"Who do you think you are, Joseph?"

It's a family like yours and mine. We have our jealousies, our feelings of rejection, our fears about the future.

But we also have our abilities to love and reconcile when the time is right.

In this story of Joseph we see the generosity of a man who has every reason to hate his brothers. And he not only has every reason to want to exercise vengeance on his brothers, he has all the necessary power as governor of the country.

But instead of focusing on his differences, and on his legitimate complaints against his brothers, he chooses to recognize his family ties: his ties of blood, DNA, and loyalty. His common ties of identity. He chooses to recreate the bonds of fraternity broken by the actions of his brothers.

And the great Christian family is like yours, and like mine, and like Joseph's, and like MFM. We have our differences of opinion, our sometimes petty jealousies, our feelings of rejection, our fears about the future.

This Book is a history of how we have been trying to arrive at a common understanding of faithfulness and of God's will for the earth. We've divided it into two major sections : the Old Testament, and the New Testament. I'd like to suggest this morning that it's also a testament to the fact that we haven't always been able to agree on what faithfulness means.

In the book of the Acts of the Apostles we read that the faithful in Jerusalem disputed over the reception of non-Jews; That the apostle Paul quarreled with Barnabas and that they parted; That Paul and Peter were also quarreling over whether or not non-Jews could be embraced within the community of the faithful.

Throughout the history of the Church our differences of understanding of fidelity have regularly produced separations, and all of the hurts and animosity that comes with heated argument :

The inability to find healthy co-existence caused a break between the Church of the West and the Church of the East, and ended up in the creation of the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches.

In the west, we eventually see a break between the Catholic Church and the Churches of the 16th century Reformation.

We then see a break between the Protestant churches of the states and the "free" Protestant Churches.

The breakdown continued during the Reformation, and we see a break between the various churches in Europe of the 16th century and the Mennonite Church of which we are members.

Even within the Mennonite family we have differences of opinion on how to best follow Jesus. So we have the Mennonites, the Mennonite Brethren, the Amish, churches of a traditional bent and those that are more liberal. Etc. Etc. Etc.

Today we have in the Church a multitude of Christian faith communities that are distinguished by their differences ... but also distinguished by the fact that we all stand in the tradition modelled in this passage from Genesis and from Matthew :

We are all called to develop the ability to love and to reconcile at the appropriate time.

I think that if Joseph's story has a message for the Church today it is that if we are to seek Christian unity we have to begin by adopting the ability to recognize not only the wounds we have inflicted on each other, but also to recognize the fact that we are born of the same Father;

That we all share the same blood of Christ, and that we derive our life from this blood, in spite of the fact that some are of type A (positive or negative), or B, or AB, or O;

That we are constructed of the same Christian DNA, in spite of the fact that I may have blue eyes, and that you may have brown eyes;

In short, that we all have a family identity that draws us together and should make it possible for us to find common ground, despite the fact that we are not clones.

I spoke at the beginning of this meditation of "my sister". In fact, in my family we are three - I have two sisters.

My parents both had dark hair and brown eyes. My mother was right-handed, my father left-handed.

I was born - red hair, blue eyes, right - handed.

My first sister was born - dark hair, brown eyes, right-handed.

My second sister was born - red hair, one brown eye, one blue eye, left-handed.

My parents thankfully never had any more children – I shudder to think of what number four might have been.

But that's my family : two strands of DNA combining to produce remarkably different people. And yet, different people sharing many of the same physical and psychological traits, as well as sharing a common history and sense of belonging.

But, as I've said elsewhere, family relationships are complicated. Over the years we've hurt each other; we've argued; we've sometimes carried grudges longer than anyone should. But we've also shared losses together; we've cried together; we've tried to comfort each other.

We've sometimes done this successfully, in healthy ways.

We've sometimes done this poorly, and have suffered for it.

MFM's DNA, it seems to me, is much like the DNA of my family : we've shared much over the years :

happy moments and sad moments;

times of great celebration and moments of great loss;

we've suffered together as one or the other of us has struggled with illness or injury;

and we've suffered together as we've grappled with issues that have divided us.

We've sometimes hurt each other, and we've sometimes comforted each other.

We're not perfect. (How's that for an understatement ??)

But we're *family!* We *belong* together, even if we don't always *get along*.

We're family. And because we're family, we may sometimes seem to be a bit cliquish. We hope we're a welcoming circle, but it may sometimes feel like we're entertaining visitors rather than embracing new brothers and sisters.

I suppose that's normal enough – it takes time for anyone to feel like they're fully a part of a new circle of friends.

Even in a family it can sometimes take time for new arrivals to have the sense that they've been fully accepted.

I hope all of you feel that you've been fully accepted into this circle.

I hope all of you find here a place where old hurts can heal.

I hope all of you feel that you're *welcome* here, not just *tolerated*.

And, above all, I hope all of you find here a place where new hurts, if and when they occur, can be acknowledged, attended to, and forgiven.