

**Recrimination**  
**Genesis 45: 1-15, Pentecost 9, Year A**  
**14 August 2011**  
**By The Reverend Barkley Thompson**

The priest parked his car in a no-parking zone because he was short on time and couldn't find a parking place. He slipped a note under his windshield wiper that read, "I have circled the block ten times. If I don't park here, I'll miss my appointment. Forgive us our trespasses."

When he returned a half hour later, he found a ticket under the same wiper. The police officer had attached his own note, which read, "I've circled this block for ten years. If I don't give you a ticket I'll lose my job. Lead us not into temptation!"

The priest knew his error, and he could expect the policeman's legitimate recrimination. But we've entered into an era in which the recriminating response has become so knee-jerk that we've come *always* to expect it, haven't we?

We're now two weeks removed from the culmination of the congressional debate on the federal debt ceiling, and that distance offers some time for reflection. The debate was a spectacle that disappointed and entranced—the way seeing a car wreck on the Interstate entrances—in equal measure. Any thoughtful observer was able, if he wanted, to cull the data pertaining to our nation's growing debt and yawning budget deficit and recognize *all* the things that must occur in tandem in we are to get our fiscal house in order, not only for the present but also for our future and that of our children and grandchildren.

But what did we hear from our leaders and from the network news channels? When the subject of tweaking Social Security or Medicare was raised, those on the left made wild accusations that our grandparents would find themselves left on the curb, homeless.

When reductions in defense spending were suggested, those on the right reproached that our national security would be imperiled, as if Chinese paratroopers are lurking just off the West Coast.

And when *any* change in the tax code was broached, meetings fell apart and the accusations flew.

It was a spectacle, wasn't it? When each negotiation collapsed, both sides ran to their respective television cameras to levy charges of bad faith against the other side. Each comment was calculated to burn the opponent. Blame was everywhere.

Recrimination. It has become the hallmark characteristic of our governmental process. And what ultimately struck me as I watched the circus play out in Washington day after day is that we shouldn't be surprised. What we saw there is nothing more than a concentrated version

of our present culture-at-large. It has become our *cultural* hallmark: the breakdown of relationships due to our increasing need to reproach and place blame.

Virtually every negative interaction in our lives—between spouses, in the workplace, at the scene of the fender-bender, among friends and strangers—is defined by recrimination. It has become so sub-conscious as to be formulaic: After any conflict, we immediately position *ourselves* beyond the boundary of fault and pour blame elsewhere, *anywhere* else.

Recrimination is corrosive. Whether in government or in the family, blame draws lines, irrevocably separates people, and solves precious little. It may make us momentarily feel righteous, but eventually it leaves us hollow. But we're so mired in that way of living, what is the alternative?

Today in our first reading, we near the end of the Joseph story. It's a story this parish knows well, since you staged the theatrical version here some years ago. Joseph is the younger, favored son of his father Jacob. It is to Joseph that Jacob gives that amazing Technicolor dream coat. After a conflicted relationship with his jealous older brothers, the brothers first throw Joseph into a pit and then sell him to a slave-trading caravan. Thus begins the downward spiral of Joseph's life, which includes, in addition to slavery in Egypt, a false accusation of attempted rape and consequent imprisonment. Joseph has reason to blame!

Eventually, after years of struggle, Joseph rises to prominence in the service of Pharaoh and effectively becomes the governor of Egypt. When, back home in Canaan, there is a famine, Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt to buy grain for their starving families. They encounter Joseph, but they don't recognize him all grown up and wielding such authority. Joseph, though, knows *them* in an instant, these who have so misused him. According to our culture, what should happen next?

Recrimination! A nationally televised expose should be aired, in which Joseph the governor indicts his brothers, humiliates them, and then either enslaves them as he was enslaved or else sends them home empty-handed to starve.

In this instance, the question is not whether recrimination is *valid*. There's no doubt that it is. Joseph has been wronged by his brothers. His human integrity has been compromised in the most horrific ways. There would be righteousness in whatever blame he casts and whatever retribution he exacts. And, it would neither solve nor redeem anything.

Joseph's response upon revealing his identity to his brothers is stupefying. "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt," he says, "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. God

sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”

Can you believe it? Joseph says that instead of preparing him to get back at the brothers who sold him into slavery, God has prepared him to save their lives. To us, this doesn't seem right. How can Joseph see the world this way, so differently than we in our culture would see it?

We learn the answer earlier in the story, when Joseph is rotting in a jail cell. Genesis tells us that “the Lord was with Joseph and showed him *hesedh*,” a Hebrew word which means steadfast love, *unflinching* love. You see, at no time during those long years does Joseph dwell upon the actions of his brothers. He does not give blame a Petri dish in which to fester. Instead, Joseph gives his heart to the God who loves him fiercely and never leaves him alone in the pit or the jail cell. He knows that God did not *put him* in chains nor *want him* to be there, but he also knows that God will, given the chance, work miracles of grace *through* any circumstance, even the most debilitating.

When Joseph ultimately is raised from the pit to great heights, he is able to look back at *all* he has experienced—even the darkest shadows—through the lens of God's steadfast, unflinching love. Surely, he would rather *not* have been a slave, but he recognizes that only because of his slavery and what emerged from it is he able to save his very family from starving.

I hope we can see that this perspective saves *both* Joseph's family *and* Joseph himself. For them, sustenance is provided. For *him*, his entire life, a life that easily could have been ruined by the need to levy recrimination and blame, instead has been marked by hope and joy because he has recognized and responded to God's steadfast love.

It's a great story, but is it possible in the real world, given the blame we cast about in our personal lives, not to mention the spectacle of mutual recrimination we see in the behavior of our national leaders?

Actually, yes, with God's help. There is, in our recent memory, a real-life witness. In volatile South Africa, as Apartheid was beginning to crumble and order along with it, Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu responded like Joseph. Bishop Tutu, like so many others, had suffered at the hands of white South Africans. He legitimately could have cast blame. Ray McCauley, a white South African pastor, recounts an incident where he and Bishop Tutu were together asked to confront an angry mob seeking retribution for the killing of black civilians. “I'd never seen anything like it,” McCauley says, “Police helicopters circled overhead. In the bushes marksmen had guns trained on the crowd, who were out for blood. Desmond took it all in stride. He asked for a glass of Scotch whisky double, sipped it slowly, then stood up and with

nothing but the power of his own voice persuaded tens of thousands of angry marchers to disperse.”

Ray McCauley gets one thing wrong. Bishop Tutu *didn't* rely solely on the power of his own voice. He relied upon the steadfast and unflinching love of the God who had walked with *him* through the darkest shadow of Apartheid and who, Tutu knew that day, could melt the recriminating bloodlust of his brothers and sisters. That steadfast love protected Bishop Tutu from the corrosion of his soul caused by festering blame. That unflinching love empowered Bishop Tutu to chair South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which served as an international witness to the way that nation states far more conflicted than our own can move forward in hope, *without* corrosive recrimination and blame. God did not cause Apartheid, and God did not desire for Bishop Tutu to suffer under it, but God surely did work *through* Bishop Tutu's experience, like God worked through Joseph, to provide new and abundant life to black and white South Africans alike.

As with Desmond Tutu, as with Joseph, so it can be with us. In our families, in our community, in our politics—God willing—we can see our relationships through a different lens. We can, even in the wake of conflict and hurt, define our response by the *hesedh* of God—God's steadfast love and good hope for us *and* for the other—rather than corrosive recrimination and blame. Nothing less will redeem us or our relationships. Nothing less will preserve our nation or our lives.

*Amen.*