

August 20, 2017  
Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant  
“For Good”  
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### **Genesis 45:1–15**

<sup>45</sup> Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.<sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. <sup>10</sup> You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. <sup>11</sup> I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' <sup>12</sup> And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup> You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." <sup>14</sup> Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

### **Romans 8:26–39**

<sup>26</sup> Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. <sup>27</sup> And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. <sup>28</sup> We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. <sup>29</sup> For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. <sup>30</sup> And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified. <sup>31</sup> What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else? <sup>33</sup> Who will bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. <sup>34</sup> Who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. <sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? <sup>36</sup> As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as

sheep to be slaughtered.” <sup>37</sup>No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup>For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup>nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

*“For Good”*  
*Genesis 45:1–15; Romans 8:26–39*

Last week our church archivist sent me a nearly fifty-year-old sermon preached from this pulpit by the Reverend Al Jeandheur, who was then the pastor of this congregation. The occasion was the Sunday of the dedication of the Alexander McGaffin Carillon, named for another former pastor. But, having prepared a sermon on Jesus’ baptism that would tie into the dedication of the carillon, Reverend Jeandheur found himself in the position of needing to respond to the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy, which had happened just a few days before. In other words, he needed to preach the gospel of God’s unconditional love and radical justice to a congregation of people feeling bewildered and angry and afraid and sad.

In his sermon, Reverend Jeandheur wrestled with the same questions we find ourselves wrestling with today: where – and how – do we find God’s presence in the midst of the most difficult events of our lives, our country, our world?<sup>1</sup> And how can anything good come from the hatred and violence that human beings have been inflicting on each other since the beginning of time?

Today we heard two texts, one from the book of Genesis and one from Paul’s letter to the Romans. Both of these texts make a radical claim: that even in the worst, most devastating events of our lives, God is at work, for *good*. In our Genesis text, Joseph and his brothers are alone in a room of the Egyptian palace, where Joseph now holds a position of power and authority. Although Joseph knows that these men who are seeking food to survive a famine are in fact his brothers, they have not yet figured out that the man before them, who holds their future in his hands, is the brother they threw into a ditch and sold into slavery. As far as they know, that brother is long gone. Sitting in his seat of power after a long, painful life journey, Joseph has been waiting for this

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<sup>1</sup> Sermon by the Reverend Albert Jeandheur, June 9, 1968, Church of the Covenant.

moment to reveal his identity, and to seek his revenge. Instead, Joseph is overcome, both with emotion and with the presence of God, who suddenly appears in this story after being conspicuously absent for quite some time. Joseph says to his brothers: “do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

Later, in Genesis, chapter 50, speaking again to his brothers, Joseph makes it even more explicit, “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good.” Joseph discovers the presence of God in retrospect, looking back on his life’s journey. But in Paul’s letter to the Romans, we get the sense that Paul has always been intimately attuned to God’s presence. This is one of the most famous passages in all the Bible, in part because of how eloquently Paul describes God’s Spirit constantly at work in and through and all around us – praying for us, searching our hearts, interceding for us.

And then, Paul writes this: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” This sentence is simultaneously one of the most comforting, bewildering, and infuriating sentences in all the Bible. It is **comforting** to think that whatever hardships we face, God is working in and through them, for *good*. It is **bewildering** to imagine that God could work through illness and death, break-ups and divorce, job loss, bankruptcy, addictions and mistakes of all kinds, for *good*. And it is **infuriating** and, frankly, insulting, for us to ever suggest that God could work through murder and rape, terrorism and hate, tsunamis and earthquakes and hurricanes that kill by the thousands, and somehow use them, for *good* or that God only makes good for those who know and love God.

My colleague Mark Ramsey points out in a sermon on this text, Paul begins this passage with *everything*, as in “*everything* works together for good for those who love God and are called according to God’s purpose,” and Paul ends with *nothing*, as in, “*nothing* in all creation will separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ.” If you have a hard time accepting these statements, you are not alone; because between the everything and the nothing, we live in the real world, where the love of God too often seems in short supply. Wouldn’t it make more sense if Paul said *nothing* is working together for good and *everything* in the world is working to separate us from the love of God?<sup>2</sup> Yes,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Ramsey, “Really?”, sermon delivered at Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, TX, August 13, 2017.

that might make more sense, but only if we have misconstrued what the Bible means by these two crucial concepts: *God* and *good*.

Much of the time we imagine *God* as a cosmic butler, a benign force that designs and organizes and orchestrates our lives, hopefully responding quickly and affirmatively to our requests. But the book of Genesis paints a very different picture. Here we learn that God is the creator of *everything*. Without God, there is nothing. No ocean or sand, no sunset or flower, no sweet corn or pomegranate, no great blue heron or Bengal tiger, no man or woman or child, no laughter or tears or hugs or kisses. God created and called creation good – and this *good* creation includes destruction and decay and death. So God is not something we can ever fully understand or control or even define. God is creator, and God is mystery.

And what about this word *good*? At the very end of Genesis, at the conclusion of Joseph's story, when God re-enters the picture, we learn what "good" is: good is reconciliation of estranged family members; good is new life when you thought all was lost; good is the awareness that when you thought God had abandoned you, you discover that in fact, *nothing* can separate you from God's love.

One summer Father Gregory Boyle, who runs a ministry in Los Angeles for former gang members, gave an all-day training on gangs to six hundred social workers. He had two men with him, and one of them was a guy named José, who was in his late 20s. He now works as part of a substance abuse team, but prior to that he been a heroin addict and a gang member and tattooed.

Jose gets up and he says very offhandedly: "You know, I guess you could say that my mom and me, we didn't get along so good. I guess I was six when she looked at me and she said, 'Why don't you just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.'" The whole audience **gasped**, and then he laughed and said, "It's sounds way worser in Spanish." Then he said, "You know, I guess I was nine when my mom drove me down to the deepest part of Baja California, and she walked me up to an orphanage and she said, 'I found this kid.' I was there 90 days until my grandmother could get out of her where she had dumped me and she came and rescued me."

He tells the audience "My mom beat me every single day. In fact, I had to wear three T-shirts to school every day." And then he kind of loses the battle with his own tears a little and he says: "I wore three T-shirts well into my adult years, because I was ashamed of my wounds. I didn't want anybody to see them. But now my wounds are my friends. I welcome my wounds. I run my fingers over my wounds." Then he looks at this crowd and he says, "How can I help the wounded if I don't welcome my own wounds?"<sup>3</sup>

That all things work together for *good* doesn't mean that God will meet our every need or give us our heart's desire – that's not who God is and that's not the kind of good God creates. God's good isn't measured by our successes or achievements, by our bank accounts or 401Ks, or by the apparent happiness of our families. According to Joseph's story, good is what comes *after* suffering, betrayal, persecution, imprisonment, even death. And according to Paul, God's ongoing creative work is the work of transformation, for God is transforming each one of us to be more like Jesus – conforming us, Paul says, to the image of God's Son, whose life only became good news after suffering, betrayal, persecution, imprisonment, and death.

*Good* is what happens as we become more like Jesus, and Jesus was without a stable home or a steady job. Jesus had friends who didn't understand him very well and a family who thought he was mentally unhinged. Jesus was perpetually in conflict with religious and civil authorities who wanted to, and eventually did, have him tortured and killed. **This is not what we tend to think of as good.** And yet, according to Paul, the measure of good in a life is revealed by *how much that life looks like Jesus's life*.

Paul also adds something else to this definition of good: everything, Paul writes, work *together* for good. That phrase, *works together* is a translation of the Greek work *synergy*. According to Paul, the good that God is able to work out for all of us as God conforms us to the image of Jesus, is a *synergy* of all that happens in our lives, the good, the bad, and the ugly.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last week, both around tables at church meetings and in the media, I've heard a lot of people say that what is happening in our country – as awful as it is – is, in some way, for *good*. What we now see out in the open is

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<sup>3</sup> Used in Derek Starr Redwine's sermon, "Good," delivered at Fairmount Presbyterian Church, Cleveland, OH, July 31, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*



what has been lurking in hiding: a deep and even violent commitment on the part of some citizens to an ideology that says white, Christian people are superior to everyone else, anyone who is other.

Let's be clear, this is a total and complete perversion of Christian theology. So how could this possible by a good thing that we are seeing it out in the open? Well, it's hard to fight something you can't see, and maybe if we can get honest about our past and all the suffering and persecution and hardship we have inflicted on people we label *other*, we can finally do the difficult work of becoming a country that truly practices our declaration that America is a place of liberty and justice for *all*. But be warned, this kind of *good* only comes through the synergistic work of people coming together, people who are willing to endure the kinds of things that Jesus endured when he spoke truth to power: rejection, anger, persecution, betrayal, imprisonment, death.

In his sermon nearly fifty years ago, Reverend Jeandheur reminded this congregation that Jesus' life was characterized by a commitment to be *with* others, to draw alongside them, to act on their behalf...and as his followers, we are called to make that same commitment. We are called to act on behalf of others, even when our actions lead to our suffering. Like Joseph whose life made sense only when he was reunited and reconciled with the brothers who had betrayed him; like Paul, who worked tirelessly and at great personal peril to spread the gospel; like Jesus, who lived, loved, suffered, and died, we are called to work together, with and for others who need to hear the strange and complicated good news that nothing in all creation can separate us from the God who created everything.

This is not a time to be neutral. This is not a time to hide our wounds or to act as though all that matters is a superficial kind of happiness or success or achievement. This is the time to come together, to claim God's promise that in and through all the circumstances of our lives, God reveals God's strange and mysterious, and sometimes painful, goodness. This is the time to follow in Jesus' footsteps; a time to profess in word and deed that nothing, nothing, nothing, in this world or the next, can separate us from the love of God, our creator, which is for us. It is for *all* God's beloved creatures, *no exceptions*.

Amen.