

Genesis 50:15-21

Romans 8:28-39

“THE BIG PICTURE”

OUR SON, DEREK, CALLED FROM PITTSBURGH LAST WEEK AND WHAT HE HAD TO SAY REMINDED ME OF A STORY I HEARD MANY YEARS AGO.

A MOTHER WAS TALKING TO HER YOUNG SON & TOLD HIM THAT SHE HAD JUST HEARD SOME EXCITING NEWS.

MISTER ROGERS WAS GOING TO BE ON THE CAPTAIN KANGAROO SHOW THE NEXT DAY & MISTER ROGERS & CAPTAIN KANGAROO WERE HER SON’S VERY FAVORITE TELEVISION SHOWS.

THE NEXT DAY, WHEN THE SHOW CAME ON & MISTER ROGERS DID, IN FACT, APPEAR WITH CAPTAIN KANGAROO, THE LITTLE BOY WENT RUNNING FROM THE ROOM CRYING.

HIS MOTHER WAS STUNNED & WENT INTO HIS BEDROOM TO FIND OUT WHY IN THE WORLD HE WAS CRYING WHEN HIS WILDEST DREAM HAD JUST COME TRUE.

THROUGH HIS SOBS, THE BOY SAID, *“I CAN’T WATCH IT, MOM. IT’S TOO EXCITING. IT’S JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.”*

THE REASON DEREK MADE ME THINK OF THAT STORY IS BECAUSE HE WAS CALLING TO TELL ME THAT THERE WAS GOING TO BE A SPECIAL VIEWING OF THE NATIONAL HOCKEY LEAGUE’S STANLEY CUP THE NEXT DAY FOR THE SEMINARY COMMUNITY AND THERE WOULD ONLY BE A HANDFUL OF PEOPLE PRESENT.

OUR 8-YEAR-OLD GRANDSON DYLAN HADN’T BEEN ABLE TO SLEEP THE NIGHT BEFORE BECAUSE HE WAS SO EXCITED ABOUT SOMETHING THAT WAS *“JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE.”*

I TELL YOU THAT TO TELL YOU THIS – THE TWO PASSAGES WE’LL BE READING THIS MORNING – ONE FROM THE OLD TESTAMENT & ONE FROM THE NEW – ARE MY TWO FAVORITE PASSAGES IN THE ENTIRE BIBLE.

IT FEELS “*JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE*” AND IF I RUN FROM THE SANCTUARY IN SOBS, YOU’LL KNOW THAT I’VE SIMPLY BEEN OVERCOME WITH EXCITEMENT.

THE OLD TESTAMENT PASSAGE IS FOUND IN THE BOOK OF GENESIS - GENESIS 50:15-21.

OUR NEW TESTAMENT LESSON IS FOUND IN THE EIGHTH CHAPTER OF PAUL’S LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN ROME – ROMANS 8:28-39.

(After Scripture)

I DON’T THINK I WOULD HAVE ALWAYS LISTED THESE TWO PASSAGES AS MY FAVORITES IN THE BIBLE BUT OVER THE YEARS I FIND THAT I AM DRAWN TO THEM AGAIN & AGAIN.

I THINK THESE PASSAGES OF SCRIPTURE EXPRESS MORE PROFOUNDLY WHAT THE CENTER OF MY FAITH IS THAN ANY OTHER VERSES IN THE BIBLE.

THE PASSAGE FROM GENESIS IS ONE THAT CAN OFFER TREMENDOUS HOPE & PROMISE – IF UNDERSTOOD PROPERLY.

ON THE OTHER HAND, IF IT IS MISUNDERSTOOD, IT CAN LEAD TO A CYNICAL & EVEN HOSTILE ATTITUDE TOWARD GOD.

FIRST OF ALL, LET’S REMEMBER THE STORY OF JOSEPH – ONE OF THE GREATEST STORIES IN THE BIBLE AND ONE OF THE GREATEST STORIES IN ALL THE WORLD.

JOSEPH WAS THE SECOND YOUNGEST SON OF HIS FATHER JACOB.

HE'S DEARLY LOVED BY JACOB – AND HE KNOWS IT.

HE RECEIVES THAT FABLED “COAT OF MANY COLORS” THAT NONE OF HIS BROTHERS RECEIVED.

HE HAS DREAMS OF HIS FAMILY BEING SUBSERVIENT TO HIM – AND THEN HE'S FOOLISH ENOUGH TO TELL THEM ABOUT THESE DREAMS.

HIS BROTHERS EVENTUALLY GROW WEARY OF JOSEPH'S FAVORED STATUS & HIS WILLINGNESS TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THAT FAVORED STATUS AT EVERY OPPORTUNITY.

THROUGH AN UNUSUAL SET OF CIRCUMSTANCES, HIS BROTHERS SELL HIM INTO SLAVERY & RATHER THAN TELL THEIR FATHER WHAT HAD HAPPENED, THEY CONCOCT A FAR-FETCHED STORY ABOUT HIM BEING EATEN BY LIONS – EVEN SHOWING DAD THE BLOOD-STAINED MULTI-COLORED COAT AS PROOF OF THEIR LITTLE BROTHER'S DEMISE.

AFTER A SET OF EVEN MORE UNUSUAL CIRCUMSTANCES, JOSEPH RISES TO POWER IN EGYPT AND IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DISTRIBUTION OF FOOD THROUGHOUT ALL THE NEIGHBORING LANDS.

HIS BROTHERS COME TO JOSEPH, BEGGING FOR HELP FOR THEIR PEOPLE.

THEY DON'T RECOGNIZE *HIM*, BUT HE REGOGNIZES *THEM*.

THE CIRCUMSTANCES BECOME STRANGER STILL & HIS BROTHERS & FATHER ALL END UP IN THE LAND OF EGYPT AS FAVORED CITIZENS.

WHEN JACOB DIES, THOUGH, JOSEPH'S BROTHERS ARE AFRAID THAT HE MIGHT STILL BE HOLDING A GRUDGE AGAINST THEM BECAUSE OF THE WAY THEY TREATED HIM.

THEY'RE AFRAID THAT, SINCE THEIR FATHER JACOB HAS DIED, JOSEPH WILL FINALLY RETALIATE AGAINST THEM.

THIS IS THE PASSAGE WE'VE READ THIS MORNING.

THE BROTHERS CONCOCT ANOTHER TALE – THIS TIME OF THEIR FATHER TELLING THEM TO ASK JOSEPH TO FORGIVE THEM FOR THEIR CRUELTY.

JOSEPH REMINDS THEM THAT HE FORGAVE THEM A LONG TIME AGO & THEN HE TELLS THEM OF A POWERFUL LESSON HE'S LEARNED – A LESSON THAT STANDS AT THE HEART OF THIS STORY AND, I BELIEVE, AT THE HEART OF OUR FAITH.

HE SAYS, “*EVEN THOUGH YOU INTENDED TO DO HARM TO ME, GOD INTENDED IT FOR GOOD...*”

HERE'S WHERE WE HAVE TO BE EXTREMELY CAREFUL IN THE WAY WE UNDERSTAND WHAT JOSEPH IS SAYING.

I THINK THE KEY LIES IN THE MEANING OF THE WORD “INTENDED.”

ITS ROOT IS A HEBREW WORD THAT SUGGESTS “WEAVING.”

IN OTHER WORDS, THE EVIL THAT WAS DONE BY JOSEPH'S BROTHERS WAS “WEAVED” BY GOD INTO SOMETHING GOOD.

IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD IS THE ONE RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EVIL.

IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD WANTED THESE THINGS TO HAPPEN TO JOSEPH.

IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD PLANNED ALL OF THIS SO THAT GOOD WOULD EVENTUALLY PREVAIL.

THE EVIL IS STILL EVIL.

IT WASN'T GOD'S DESIRE THAT JOSEPH ENDURE BETRAYAL, SLAVERY, IMPRISONMENT & PAIN.

ONCE THE EVIL HAD TAKEN PLACE, THOUGH – ONCE THE HARSH & TRAGIC EXPERIENCES HAD COME INTO JOSEPH’S LIFE - GOD WEAVED IT INTO SOMETHING GOOD.

I REMEMBER WORKING WITH A CHURCH DECORATING COMMITTEE THAT WAS LOOKING TO RENOVATE THE SANCTUARY.

IT WAS AN OLD & HISTORIC DOWNTOWN BUILDING THAT WAS MORE THAN A HUNDRED YEARS OLD.

IT WAS A STUNNINGLY BEAUTIFUL CHURCH, FILLED WITH STAINED GLASS WINDOWS & VERY TRADITIONAL.

THE COMMITTEE WAS DECIDING ON A PAINT COLOR FOR THE WALLS.

THEY WERE – AND APPARENTLY ALWAYS HAD BEEN – A COLOR SIMILAR TO THE WALLS HERE AT EASTMINSTER.

AFTER WEEKS OF DISCUSSION, THE COMMITTEE DETERMINED THAT THOSE WALLS WOULD REMAIN AS THEY HAD ALWAYS BEEN – YELLOW.

BUT THEN, BILL, THE CHAIRMAN OF THE COMMITTEE – AN ELDERLY ARCHITECT – CAME UP WITH A RADICALLY DIFFERENT IDEA.

HE SUGGESTED THE CROWN MOLDING BE PAINTED A DIFFERENT COLOR.

THAT, IN ITSELF, WAS A BIT OF A SHOCK TO THE OTHER MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE.

BUT HIS COLOR SUGGESTION ABSOLUTELY HORRIFIED THEM.

BILL SUGGESTED THE CROWN MOLDING BE PURPLE – AND RED – AND GREEN – AND BLUE!

I REMEMBER THE AWKWARD SILENCE THAT FOLLOWED HIS SUGGESTION.

LATER, PEOPLE ADMITTED THEY THOUGHT BILL WAS EITHER JOKING OR WAS LOSING HIS SENSES IN HIS OLD AGE.

HE CONVINCED THE COMMITTEE TO AT LEAST GIVE IT A CHANCE BY HAVING A SMALL CORNER IN AN OUT-OF-SIGHT SPOT IN THE BALCONY PAINTED AS HE WAS SUGGESTING.

WE ALL LOOKED AT IT & WERE STUNNED INTO ANOTHER AWKWARD SILENCE.

BUT THIS TIME THE SILENCE WAS BECAUSE WE WERE OVERWHELMED WITH THE BEAUTY WE SAW.

BILL HAD WEAVED SOMETHING THAT DIDN'T SEEM TO MAKE ANY GOOD SENSE AT ALL INTO SOMETHING THAT TOOK OUR BREATH AWAY WITH ITS BEAUTY.

THAT'S WHAT JOSEPH IS SAYING HERE & THAT'S WHAT HAPPENED IN HIS LIFE.

GOD WEAVED THINGS TOGETHER THAT SEEMED ABSOLUTELY HORRIBLE INTO SOMETHING THAT WAS GOOD & BEAUTIFUL.

AGAIN, THAT DOESN'T IN ANY WAY, DENY EVIL OR PAIN OR DIFFICULTY OR TRAGEDY.

IT DOESN'T, IN ANY WAY, MINIMIZE THE HARSH REALITIES OF LIFE.

AND IT ALSO DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD IS THE ONE WHO IS THE SOURCE OF OUR PAIN OR OUR DIFFICULTIES OR OUR TRAGEDIES.

IT DOESN'T MEAN THAT GOD HAS BROUGHT THEM UPON US SIMPLY TO THEN MAKE SOMETHING GOOD COME OUT OF THEM.

WHAT IT *DOES* MEAN IS THAT GOD IS ALWAYS STANDING WITH US IN THE MIDST OF THOSE PAINFUL EXPERIENCES & IS ALWAYS AT WORK TO ENABLE GOOD TO EMERGE FROM OUR HARSHEST TRAGEDIES.

IT MEANS THAT GOD IS LOOKING AT “THE BIG PICTURE” OF OUR LIVES & GOD IS THE FINAL ARTIST.

SOMEONE ELSE MAY DABBLE AT IT & EVEN TRY TO DESTROY IT, BUT IT IS GOD WHO OFFERS THE FINISHING TOUCHES.

GOD IS THE ONE WHO WILL TAKE THE CATASTROPHE THAT IS YOUR LIFE & TRANSFORM IT INTO A MASTERPIECE.

THINK OF THOSE WORDS WE’VE READ THIS MORNING FROM PAUL.

“WE KNOW THAT ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD FOR THOSE WHO LOVE GOD, WHO ARE CALLED ACCORDING TO HIS PURPOSE.”

CONSIDER THE MAN WHO MADE THAT STATEMENT.

IN ANOTHER LETTER, HE SAYS, “FIVE TIMES I HAVE RECEIVED THE FORTY LASHES MINUS ONE. THREE TIMES I WAS BEATEN WITH RODS. ONCE I RECEIVED A STONING. THREE TIMES I WAS SHIPWRECKED; FOR A NIGHT AND A DAY I WAS ADrift AT SEA; ON FREQUENT JOURNEYS, IN DANGER FROM RIVERS, DANGER FROM BANDITS, DANGER FROM MY OWN PEOPLE, DANGER FROM GENTILES, DANGER IN THE CITY, DANGER IN THE WILDERNESS, DANGER AT SEA, DANGER FROM FALSE BROTHERS AND SISTERS; IN TOIL AND HARDSHIP, THROUGH MANY A SLEEPLESS NIGHT, HUNGRY AND THIRSTY, OFTEN WITHOUT FOOD, COLD AND NAKED.”

THIS IS THE SAME MAN WHO SAID “*ALL THINGS WORK TOGETHER FOR GOOD...*”

PAUL HAD TO COME TO THAT REALIZATION HIMSELF.

THIS ISN’T SOMETHING THAT ANYONE ELSE COULD SAY TO HIM.

NOR IS IT SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN SAY TO ANOTHER PERSON OR THAT ANOTHER PERSON CAN SAY TO YOU WITHOUT IT BEING CRUEL & INSENSITIVE.

IT'S A REALIZATION THAT WE ALL MUST COME TO OURSELVES.

IT'S THE REALIZATION THAT GOD STANDS WITH US IN THE WORST OF ALL OF LIFE'S TRAGEDIES & PONDERES HOW TO TRANSFORM THOSE TRAGEDIES INTO TRIUMPHS.

AGAIN, IT DOESN'T MINIMIZE THE PAIN OR NEGATE THE EVIL THAT WE EXPERIENCE IN LIFE.

SOMEONE HAS USED THE STORY OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS AS AN EXAMPLE OF THE POINT OF BOTH THE STORY OF JOSEPH AND THESE WORDS OF PAUL.

WHEN JESUS STOOD AT THE TOMB OF LAZARUS, HE WASN'T SMILING.

HE WASN'T HAPPY TO BE THERE.

HE WAS ANGRY & HE WAS WEEPING.

HE WASN'T THINKING, *"OH, THIS ISN'T A BAD THING. IN FACT, IT'S REALLY A GOOD THING. IT'S A WAY TO SHOW MY POWER."*

THAT'S NOT AT ALL WHAT JESUS WAS THINKING.

HE WAS WEEPING & HE WAS ANGRY BECAUSE THE BAD THING HE'S ABOUT TO WORK FOR GOOD IS STILL BAD.

THE STORY OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS DOESN'T GIVE YOU A NAMBY-PAMBY SACCHARINE-SWEET VIEW OF SUFFERING, SAYING BAD THINGS ARE REALLY BLESSINGS IN DISGUISE OR THAT EVERY CLOUD HAS A SILVER LINING OR IF LIFE GIVES YOU LEMONS, MAKE LEMONADE.

YES, JESUS TURNED SOMETHING BAD INTO SOMETHING GOOD IN THE LIFE OF LAZARUS AND GOD TURNED SOMETHING BAD INTO

SOMETHING GOOD IN THE LIFE OF JOSEPH, BUT THOSE THINGS WERE STILL BAD!

CHRIST'S ANGER AND SORROW AT THE TOMB OF LAZARUS PROVES THAT HE HATES DEATH.

HE ALSO HATES LONELINESS & SUFFERING & SORROW & PAIN. AND WE NEED LOOK NO FURTHER THAN THE LIFE OF CHRIST HIMSELF TO SEE HOW POWERFULLY GOD IS ABLE TO TRANSFORM EVIL INTO GOOD WITHOUT THE EVIL BEING ANYTHING *BUT* EVIL.

WHEN JESUS WAS CRUCIFIED ON A FRIDAY IT WAS EVIL.

ON SUNDAY MORNING, WHEN GOD TOOK THAT EVIL & TURNED IT INTO SOMETHING GOOD, IT DIDN'T MAKE THE EVIL ANY LESS EVIL.

SO, TOO, IN YOUR OWN LIFE.

THE PAIN IS STILL PAIN.

THE SORROW IS STILL SORROW.

THE HEARTACHE IS STILL HEARTACHE.

DON'T TRY TO MINIMIZE IT. DON'T IGNORE IT. DON'T NEGATE IT.

DON'T TRY TO TALK YOURSELF OUT OF IT & DON'T ALLOW ANYONE ELSE TRY TO CONVINCING YOU THAT YOU SHOULD.

BUT ALSO DON'T EVER FORGET THAT GOD IS WALKING WITH YOU THROUGH IT ALL, WORKING AS ONLY GOD CAN TO TRANSFORM THAT PAIN, SORROW & HEARTACHE INTO SOMETHING THAT CAN BE GOOD – SOMETHING THAT CAN BE USED FOR GOD'S GLORY.

DO YOU SEE WHY I CONSIDER THESE TWO PASSAGES MY VERY FAVORITE PASSAGES IN ALL OF SCRIPTURE?

THEY'RE NOT JUST TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE – THEY'RE TOO GOOD NOT TO BE TRUE.

**AND IF YOU TRULY UNDERSTAND THEM, YOU'LL BE ABLE TO
SEE "THE BIG PICTURE" OF YOUR LIFE.**

**AND ONCE YOU SEE THAT BIG PICTURE, YOU'LL BE LIKE THAT
LITTLE BOY TRYING TO WATCH MR. ROGERS MEET CAPTAIN
KANGAROO OR DYLAN WAITING FOR HIS OWN PRIVATE VIEWING OF
THE STANLEY CUP.**

**YOU CAN'T HELP BUT SOB – WITH TEARS OF JOY & COMFORT
OVER "THE BIG PICTURE" THAT'S JUST TOO GOOD *NOT* TO BE TRUE.
AMEN.**

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