

# Union Bridge Church of the Brethren

Sermon for Sunday, September 11, 2005

Genesis 45:1-15

## Together Again

September 11<sup>th</sup>.

Haunting images of the twin towers of the World Trade Center struck by passenger jets, billowing smoke, and ultimately collapsing. Even more haunting are the images from the next several days –smoldering ruins and thousands of desperate people, posters in hand bearing pictures of loved ones who are missing.

December 26<sup>th</sup>.

Harrowing pictures of the surging tsunami that wrecked Indonesia and left tens of thousands dead and missing, many washed out to sea.

August 29<sup>th</sup>.

New pictures of horror. Hurricane Katrina comes ashore in the Gulf of Mexico. Levees fail. Homes, hospitals, schools and businesses are washed away. People are stranded, drowned. Help is slow to come. Looting and violence begin.

Sometimes we find ourselves overwhelmed – even stunned into silence – by what we have seen. We struggle to make sense of what has happened. We hear stories of incredible suffering and we wonder what it all means.

But stories of incredible suffering are not the only stories to come out of tragedies. Consider this story that comes from Indonesia's tsunami-ravaged Aceh province.

Mustafa is a truck driver. In the aftermath of last December's tsunami, he had no idea where his five year old daughter Rina might be. Mustafa had been on his way to Medan, miles away from Banda Aceh, when the devastating wave hit. When he returned he discovered his wife and daughter were missing. (Rina's mother is still missing and presumed dead.)

Rina, separated from her parents and extended family, was rescued by aid workers and placed with a woman named Mutya in Banda Aceh. Rina's name was placed on a list of children separated from their parents, and the list was posted in town as well as read over the radio. Somehow, word reached Mustafa that Rina was alive.

When he was reunited with her, he held her in his arms, overwhelmed with emotion. He fell to his knees and cried out his daughter's name over and over again. "By the grace of God, I knew you were alive!" he said. "I knew it! My precious little one, I did not give up. I kept looking."

As the father and daughter departed together, Rina waved at Mutya and kissed her hand. Mustafa cradled Rina Augustina and kissed her cheek. He then led her out into the sunshine. They were together again.

This moving tale of reunion is part of the larger story of a nearly

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unfathomable disaster. It is only one of many tales of remarkable compassion, persistence, sacrifice and service to emerge out of these tragedies. By no means does it make acceptable all the losses, all the suffering, all the pain. But it does remind us that there is always more to the story and that the full meaning of any event is never known in its immediate aftermath. The same reminders can be found in the text we heard this morning from the book of Genesis, another reunion story made possible by striking compassion.

A violent conflict had separated Joseph and his brothers. The story of Joseph begins with his brothers conspiring to kill him, and then throwing him into a pit and selling him into slavery. After this break-up, Joseph is taken down to Egypt, where he becomes a successful manager in the house of an Egyptian officer. Unfortunately, the officer's wife attempts to seduce Joseph, and her unsatisfied lust results in a jail term for Joseph.

But the Bible tells us that "the LORD was with Joseph," so he becomes the favorite of the chief jailer and later rises to the position of second-in-command to Pharaoh himself, gaining control over all the land as governor. It is in this position that Joseph encounters his brothers again, and their painful break-up results in a divine reunion.

Canaan has been hit by a severe famine, and so the brothers of Joseph travel to Egypt to buy grain. They meet with the governor, not recognizing Joseph, and they ask for his assistance. He toys with them, and even throws them into prison for a while, but ends up giving them the grain they need.

Then Joseph reveals himself, saying, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, for God sent me before you to preserve life." Then Joseph embraces his brothers with tears.

Few Old Testament stories are more appropriate for our time. As we witness horror after horror, so many people are ready to explain why these things have happened. Folks seem eager to assign responsibility, to pin blame on responsible parties, even to offer theological justification.

Among those who claim to clearly see the hand of God at work in Hurricane Katrina are two very strange bedfellows: Christian fundamentalists and Al-Qaeda. Ironic, though not all that surprising, is the agreement between the two that the storm represented the wrath of God. Al-Qaeda thinks God is angry with the United States because of our shoddy moral values and continuing interference in Islamic countries. Christian fundamentalists don't have any problem with the interference in Islamic countries, but agree with Al-Qaeda on the matter of America's shoddy moral values. In fact, one fundamentalist group has claimed that a thirty-foot storm surge and high winds that killed hundreds (maybe thousands), and left hundreds of

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thousand homeless, was just God's way of preventing a gay pride rally scheduled for last week in New Orleans.

What the story of Joseph's reunion with his brothers offers us is a reason to question the wisdom of finding the meaning of an event solely in the past, in circumstances and decisions, real or imagined, that may have caused a tragedy. Rather than looking around for someone to blame, Joseph sees and seizes the opportunity to forgive and to make a new future for himself and for his people. Joseph has every right to revenge, but instead chooses reconciliation. Joseph has every right to hate, but chooses instead to offer hope. Joseph has every reason to let his anger rage, but chooses instead to extend grace.

Joseph's choices change the meaning of the original event, even of the cruelty of his brothers who sold him into slavery. On a merely human level, it was a dastardly, despicable act. But Joseph chooses to see the hand of God at work in it. And Joseph chooses to cooperate with the will of God, insofar as he is able to understand it. He offers forgiveness. He shows compassion. He preserves life.

Theologian Dorothy Solle has argued that we have become preoccupied with the wrong question about suffering. She says that when terrible things happen, we become fixated on what has caused them. We ask, "Where has this tragedy come from?" Solle urges us to consider another question: "Where might it lead?"

We can't turn back the clock. We can't return to the time before the towers fell, or the wave hit, or the hurricane came ashore. We can't go back to a time before the accident or the divorce or the diagnosis. Whatever the causes might have been, whoever may be to blame, we can't go back and change it now. We can only choose where to go from here. We can choose revenge, hate, anger, bitterness, guilt and grudges. Or we can choose reconciliation, hope, compassion, forgiveness, healing and grace. And the choices we make will make a difference in what these events in the past ultimately mean.

Already, from the soggy south, come stories of people who have chosen a better way. Take, for instance, the story of another Joseph – Joseph Brant. A resident of New Orleans, Brant lost his apartment, walked by dozens of floating corpses, waded through filthy water and experienced intense hunger and thirst while trying to escape his inundated hometown.

But last Sunday, Joseph Brant was praising the Lord, saying the ordeal was a test that ended up dispelling his lifelong distrust of white people and setting his life on a new course. He said he hitched a ride Friday in a van driven by a group of white folks. "Before this whole thing I had a complex about white people; this thing has changed me forever," said Brant who, like many of the refugees, is black. He

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added, “It was a spiritual experience for me.”

It is only one man’s story, of course, but it reminds us that the full meaning of this great catastrophe is yet to be determined. And we all have a say in what it will be by the way we respond – by giving sacrificially, by volunteering our time, opening our doors, by welcoming aid and giving thanks for it, even when it comes from those we may have thought of as our enemies. We can make this dark hour a positive turning point, if we choose to follow God’s way of compassion, humility and forgiveness.

This is true for all tragedies, great and small. We must grieve our losses, but we do not need to let our tears blind us to the opportunities suffering sometimes brings. Somewhere in the wreckage of any relationship, in every dream destroyed, in every loss suffered, are the seeds of life and hope. Our calling is to find them, to plant them in fertile soil, to water them and to watch them grow. For as Joseph in the Bible discovered, it is the nature of God and God’s people to refuse to give in and allow disaster, injustice or suffering to have the last word.

Amen.