
WHY WE NEED GOD
GENESIS 50:15-21; ROMANS 14:1-12
A SERMON PREACHED AT DUKE UNIVERSITY CHAPEL
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We are living in the midst of crises—the detrimental impact of war between Russia and Ukraine; the environmental disasters like the earthquake devastation in Morocco or the deadly floods in Libya. There are other natural and political disasters as well but all of our lectionary texts for today reveal another type of potential disaster—relational ones, the ones that make us restless at night, the ones that cause us to gnaw at our fingernails till we eat our skin, the ones that are most primary in our daily living and surrounding us when we’re dying on a bed—human relationships. Each scripture passage for today reveals the fragility of our human relationships and points to why we need God.

There’s a song that says, “If it had not been for the Lord on my side, tell me, where would I be? Where would I be?” When we study these scriptural texts, we see where we would be. In Genesis, after their father Jacob dies, Joseph’s brothers are freaking out because of what they did to their youngest brother Joseph when they sold him into slavery, and he was taken to Egypt all because of the dreams he had. But now, Joseph is governor in Egypt, the one in power, and they fear, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” Joseph’s brothers know that when parents die, families can be torn apart, and dynamics change. Ancient families were no different from our own. Joseph’s brothers expect retribution and perhaps rightly so. They expect that their little brother Joey will pay them back for every evil deed; they know that they deserve it. This is what humans do to one another, *normally*—clap back, pay back, ‘I’ll get you back.’ And this is why we need God.

In the letter to the Romans, we also get a glimpse of the proclivities of human behavior, even in the church. “Some believe in eating anything, while the weak eat only vegetables. Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eatWhy do you pass judgment on your brother or sister? Or you, why do you despise your brother or sister? For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” The reality is that some drink sweet tea and others like unsweetened tea. Some put sugar on their grits and others put cheese on their grits. If we are honest, human beings can be pretty judgmental of other human beings at times, even of other Christians, especially of those who think differently or practice their faith differently; this happens because we make ourselves the standard of what it means to be ‘Christian.’ In these situations, Joseph’s rhetorical question to his brothers should be the one on our lips—“Am I in the place of God?” In other words, am I God? We need God to remind us that we aren’t God.

In *Mere Christianity*, writer, literary scholar, and professor of English literature at both Oxford and Cambridge Universities C.S. Lewis, muses over the possible existence of God. He writes, “If there does exist an absolute goodness it must hate most of what we do. This is the terrible fix we are in. If the universe is not governed by an absolute goodness, then all our [moral] efforts are in the long run hopeless. But if it is, then we are making ourselves enemies to that goodness every day, and are not in the least likely to do any better tomorrow, and so our case is hopeless again. . . . God is the only comfort; he is also the supreme terror: the thing we most need and the thing we most want to hide from. Some people talk as if meeting the gaze of absolute goodness would be fun. They need to think again. They are still only playing with religion. Goodness is either the great safety or the great danger—according to the way you react to it. And we have reacted the wrong way.” Historically, humans—even as the scriptures show— have had a propensity to be an enemy to goodness and operate in the mode of retribution, judgement, and a lack of mercy. This is why we need God—so we don’t treat people any less than God would. So we don’t treat people like Clackston was treated.

I didn’t know that was his name at first when I met him at the Church of the Holy Comforter in Atlanta. When I first met him and asked him his name, he just said “get out of here, get out of here.” He said that because he came to believe that was his name since everybody always told him—“get out of here.” How would you like to have your first name be ‘get out’ and your last name be ‘of here’? He was managing life with mental health issues while being deemed non-human. Do you see why we need God?

We need God because God won't say 'get out of here' but 'come, here; come and see; all you who thirsts, come to the waters; and you that have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price; Taste and see that I am good.' If we extract God from our lives, we'd all be eventually dead because we would obliterate each other as we scream at the top of our voices to one another, 'get out of here.' But the scriptures show us that God's way is a different path than the one we normally take, and if we listen closely, we may hear his still, small voice beckoning us, 'come, here, my child. Come here.' This is why we need God.

We need God to show us another way to live beyond retribution and fear but rather with forgiveness and mercy. As Joseph told his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...so have no fear." God works for the good over and over again, which is why the king in the parable in today's lectionary gospel reading (which wasn't read) says, "Should you not have had mercy on your fellow slave, as I had mercy on you?" "God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love..." We need God to help us to share the goodness and mercy that has been shared with us and will follow us all the days of our life.

We need God to also show us another way to live beyond judgement toward a wide welcome of others and other perspectives and to affirm human freedom. As we hear in Romans, "Those who eat must not despise those who abstain, and those who abstain must not pass judgment on those who eat; for God has welcomed them." We need God to help us welcome a diversity of Christian thought and practice and recognize that we are accountable to God, so in the meantime, we don't have to despise one another.

We need God so that those who hurt us like Joseph's brothers or those who practice their faith differently or those who owe us something, will not be destroyed by us but rather embraced and loved without fear. That we haven't destroyed one another and are still here walking on the face of earth tells me that God is still with us. Through the lenses of the scriptures we see that God doesn't want to tear us apart but keep us together. God desires communion. As Desmond Tutu says in his book *No Future without Forgiveness*, "We were made for togetherness." God is a sustainer and restorer of relationships. Restoration not retribution.

We need God to see that there is something more than jealousy, bitterness, suspicion, hate and retribution. We need God to know that something else is possible between us like forgiveness and reconciliation and hospitality and mercy and restoration. All of these are only possible with God, for they are not evil; they are something truly good.

In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, we hear that Aslan, the lion—the creator and one true king of the world of Narnia, the literary symbol of Jesus—is "on the move—perhaps has already landed." The children didn't know Aslan any more than others but just hearing the words shifted something. "At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside. Edmund felt a sensation of mysterious honor. Peter felt suddenly brave and adventurous. Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And they got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer."

When God is on the move and with us, there is mystery and adventure, and we may sense that there is something delicious and delightful in the atmosphere. We may sense that there is something truly good, so good that the earth's bread and wine become our heavenly food. And as we consume the communion elements, we are consumed by our need for the goodness of God. Jesus is calling amid our crises, 'Come unto me, all you who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Come, here, my child. Taste and see that I am good.'