

Next week, Pastor David will be back; this is my last sermon as I have filled in while he has been on sabbatical leave. I want to thank him for inviting me to fill in for him, and I want to thank all of you for your gracious hospitality while he has been gone. What a wonderful group of folk you are, and certainly under the most unusual of circumstances. Thank you, Gina, for serving as liturgist and for recording the sermons -- it has been great good fun. Thanks to all of you for welcoming me, for your comments about sermons, for engaging phone conversations, and for your participation in the Zoom coffee hours. I appreciate (and I have enjoyed) all of this, and you, immensely.

PRESERVING LIFE

Genesis 45: 4-20; Matthew 15: (10-20) 21-28
Twentieth Sunday in Ordinary Time • August 16, 2020
by Pat Berger

We are, each and every one of us, the beloved children of our God, our God who is our loving parent. This is an important piece of each of our faith stories. What does it mean, to be one of God's beloved children? To know God as parent? I think we don't completely know, and probably we CANNOT completely know. AND we work at figuring it out.

One of the incomplete ways we work at this, whether consciously or not, is by our experience with our own parents. Often, our first image of God resembles closely our own father or mother or maybe both. Sometimes, we expand that image by looking at others, watching as they parent. And sometimes, we have the privilege of doing our figuring by being parents ourselves. The same thing happens with the "child" part. First, each of us is someone's child. And we watch as others parent their children. And, again sometimes the privilege: of having children of our own.

The daily news provides us an abundance -- some days an overabundance -- of opportunities to hear about or see the results of various parenting skills. Sometimes it is fun. I read about an 11-year-old young woman who took a babysitting class a few months ago, when one could still do that, and one day not long after had a chance to use her new skills: a friend began to choke on a piece of candy. The 11-year-old performed the Heimlich maneuver, and her friend is alive and grateful. No doubt you, too, have stories that could be shared.

And then, there are the stories that are not as much fun, and it seems as if we are hearing more than our fair share this summer. For a couple of months now, there are stories each night of various ones of God's beloved children creating disturbances and damaging properties in various parts of the city of Portland and other cities around our country. Last week, we heard about two little children

being shot in Gresham. There are way too many of these stories each day. God's beloved children harming, or being harmed by, others of God's beloved children. Poor God. And, we all know, this is nothing new.

Last week, we read in the Book of Genesis about Joseph's brothers being fed up enough with him and his fancy coat and his tattling to their father that they threw him into a pit, and then they sold him to a group of travelling salesmen, and went home and allowed their father to think that Joseph had been killed by wild animals. Also last week, we read in the Gospel according to Matthew about Peter's lack of faith and Jesus' rescue efforts on his behalf. Imagine God, our loving parent, as these events happened. I kind of feature a loud, divine "AAAAARRRGH!!!" "All that I have done," I imagine God saying, "and now: another kink in the works!" Or something like that. "I WILL work good from this, I WILL work good from this, I WILL work good from this!" God may have muttered on the divine path back to the divine drawing board.

Well, it took several years and many adventures that we don't read in this year's lectionary, but God did, of course, work good things, which we see as we rejoin Joseph and his brothers today. Our God is a relational God, wanting always for those who have been created to be in relationship with each other and with the divine. Joseph's words make it clear to us that God had been working toward this, no matter how it was that Joseph arrived In Egypt in the first place.

By the time that we come into Joseph's story today, he was anxious to tell his brothers who he was. He asked everyone else who was in the room with them to leave, which would have been an unusual thing for a ruler to do. Then he asked his brothers to move closer to him -- the honor system of the time would have dictated that they stay a fair amount of space away from him. Now, Joseph wanted them close to him, and he wept loudly as he told them, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." It is not stated here whether or not the brothers said anything. Most likely, they were quite stunned. Joseph tried to help them to feel at ease, but there is clearly a power differential here, and the brothers may not have known exactly what to do or say. Joseph told them all that God had done -- using himself, of course, as the star of the story. This brother who made them all so miserable by being the Most Favored Child and by telling tales to their father, and now: things have turned out most excellently for him again! "God has made me lord of all Egypt; father to Pharaoh; lord of his house; lord of all Egypt;" -- in all of this phrasing, Joseph's brothers were again drawn to how important Joseph was, although now to a new hierarchy. As Joseph worked for reconciliation, for reuniting his family, then, the brothers pulled back; they were afraid of what he might REALLY have in mind for them.

But the God who really loves us, and loves us as only a parent can, loved that family in the same way, and had being doing some work on Joseph. Some of his

self-centeredness remained, but as a result of God's work in his life, Joseph was anxious to have his family back together, and together with him. He wanted to provide for their welfare during this time of famine. I think that this is the "preserving life" part that we heard read earlier. Joseph told his brothers that God had sent him, Joseph, before them in order to preserve life. That may just work two ways here. Joseph was now in a position to be able to offer life, really, to his family: he had access to an abundance of food, due to God's actions in his life, and his family was in need and would be in need for several more years. And that was only part of the story. Life, life abundant as we hear that God wants for us, means living in relationship: with our families, and most of all, with God. Joseph could not provide for his family that relationship with God; they would all have to work at that; but Joseph could be a vital part of achieving God's plan for his family, and he was.

Our Gospel story today goes at this relationship business, and preserving life business, from a different angle. The mother in our story loved her daughter very much: she had not put her in a dry well or (at least as far as we know) done any other dastardly deed. This well-loved daughter, though, was not well -- she had a demon, we are told, and the mother would go to great lengths to get help for her, to preserve her life. She came to Jesus on her search for help; apparently she had heard that Jesus could work miracles. It sounds from the reading as if she made a nuisance of herself, hollering and shrieking at Jesus, and the whole situation seemed to have left Jesus silent: the woman was a Canaanite. Jesus came to bring his message to the Jews, and was not to spend time with others. At first in our story, he would seem to ignore her. A bit rude, don't we think? And the reason isn't exactly explained to the readers. The disciples wanted him to send her away, she wanted him to heal her daughter -- and Jesus said nothing.

But then: she called him "Lord". There haven't been many times yet in Matthew where anyone has called Jesus "Lord"; it got his attention, and he responded to her, although still not what any among us would call pastorally. "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs," he says. (When it comes right down to it, the Greek word that Jesus used translates as "puppies," but still . . .) The woman brought Jesus up short: "Yes, Lord (there is that statement of faith again), yet even the dogs (puppies) eat the crumbs that fall from their master's table." Oh, I think I see a smile playing at one side of Jesus' face. The woman was pretty quick, and brave, too. She believed so strongly; life, and life abundant, would be hers, and her daughter's as well: Jesus answered her ("Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish."), and the daughter was healed, we are told, her life was preserved, instantly.

Where I would like to think we could go with all of this is beyond the models that we see of parenting, both in the Bible and in our everyday lives. Most parents on most days do their very best to be the very best parents that each of their children

needs. Knowing that gives us a starting point to imagine: how much more God as parent works on our behalf, preserving the abundant life that is the consistent divine promise to the beloved children. We will not always make the wisest of choices on any given day, or in any given moment. But the God who is our parent always, always accompanies us, and loves us into that relationship that will result in abundant, preserved life. The next and only thing we need to imagine then, is how we can ever be grateful enough, and how can we best live into that gratitude?

Let us pray.