

# Integrity

February 23, 2025

## Integrity

Many of you are familiar with a quote that is attributed to St. Francis. The Saint who is famous both for his love of nature and his attention to the poor is supposed to have said:

“Preach the Gospel at all times. If necessary, use words.”

It’s a gorgeous, pithy phrase that reminds us not only that living our faith and our values is as important or maybe even more important than giving voice to them. We need to practice Jesus’ ways when we’re outside of this building just as much as we do inside of it. It also reminds us that integrity matters. If what we say doesn’t match what we do, what good is either thing?

A lesser-known story about St. Francis bears this out. Francis was legendary for giving his clothing away to the poor, literally giving people the clothes off his back. The abbot (the leader of Francis’ monastery) was frustrated with the cost of constantly having to replace his clothes, and so he forbade Francis from doing it, forbade him from giving away his clothes. But Francis found a loophole. When he would encounter someone in need, he would say, “I cannot give you my cloak, but you could take it.” For Francis, integrity — that is having his words and his actions and his values match — was a way of life.

As I’ve been praying with our two scriptures for this week while also listening to what’s going on in the world, this theme of integrity keeps rising to the surface. In our Gospel, we pick up this week where we ended last week. If you remember, last week we read the beginning of the Sermon on the Plain, the Beatitudes, and I pointed out that unlike the version we read in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus is positioned above the crowd in an attempt to portray him and his teachings as the new Moses, sharing God’s message from a mountain, in Luke Jesus actually looks up at the disciples. The nuance bears repeating; Luke wants us to be clear that Jesus’ teaching isn’t from on high, but rather accessible to all.

Last week, we heard that when we’re in the midst of struggle, we have God’s attention, God is with us. We were told that when we are excluded and reviled and defamed for living Jesus’ ways, we’ve got God’s attention. Today Jesus continues the lesson by talking about what we are to do with that blessedness, that belovedness.

Last week he told us to rejoice even when we’re in the midst of great struggle, trusting that we’ve got God’s attention. Today, he tells us to live out of that joy, regardless of what comes our way, regardless of how others are treating us. You might be tempted to hear this and say, “Easy for you to say, Jesus. You weren’t living in times like these,” except he was. The political leaders of Jesus’ day were just as chaotic and capricious as what we’re experiencing right now. Remember, Herod had John the Baptist beheaded at the request of his stepdaughter.

Today’s Gospel is about living with integrity, especially amidst adversity. In telling us to love our enemies, to do good, to lend expecting nothing in return, Jesus is telling us that when we are backed up against the wall, continuing to live our values, continuing to magnify our belovedness, is the ultimate resistance.

“Jesus offers this ethic as a way for his followers to resist the tit-for-tat of the present age, not to be passive in the face of it. When we live this ethic in the face of this world’s violence, we are collectively saying to those who hate, abuse, strike, judge, and condemn, ‘You are not the boss of me.’ We are demonstrating that bad behavior cannot goad us into reacting in kind. We are resisting the evils we deplore.”

(Mary Hinkle Shore)

Jesus knew how tempting it would be to meet evil with evil, violence with violence, cruelty with cruelty, and in today’s Gospel he’s saying, “You’re better than that. Don’t let their behaviors and ways of doing things degrade who you are.”

## **Joseph**

Which is a perfect jumping off point to look back to the passage Karen read for us today. In some ways, the Lectionary (the 3-year suggested cycle of scripture readings for worship that many churches use) does us a disservice by chopping up the Joseph story the way it does.

So, allow me to recap some of the highlights. Joseph is the youngest son of Jacob. In fact, he’s the 12th son, and he’s his dad’s favorite. In fact, not only is he dad’s favorite, he’s kind of a brat about it. Perhaps even more than kind of a brat. He’s enough of a jerk about how dad loves him more than the brothers throw him down a well to kill him, and when that doesn’t work they sell him into slavery to a passing band of foreigners.

Without going into a lot of detail, Joseph finds his way to Egypt and into Pharaoh’s good graces and becomes an unelected second in command. (Okay, Pharaoh isn’t elected either, but the allusion was just too tempting.) Anyway, Joseph finds himself as the second in command when a great regional famine strikes the land, but because of what Joseph learns in a dream, the Egyptians are able to weather the famine while the rest of the region is devastated.

Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt seeking nourishment amidst the devastation. They don’t recognize Joseph. He tests them in multiple ways, and that’s where we pick up the story today.

Joseph, whose brothers had tried to kill him and when that didn’t work sold him into slavery, is now one of the most powerful people in all the world. His brothers, not realizing it is him, are begging for basic sustenance. The tables have turned. Joseph has unlimited power now and the brothers have none, and it is here that he chooses to reveal himself to them.

Can you imagine the fear in their minds? Can you imagine what it must have been like to realize that your fate and that of your entire family rests in the person you tried to kill and then sold like livestock? Have you ever been talking about someone and then realized that they heard what you said? It was probably like that times a trillion. Their hearts would have sunk into their stomachs. In fact, they probably would have wanted to throw up.

But then Joseph keeps going. He not only reveals himself to them, he then says, “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.” (Genesis 45:5) He not only doesn’t punish them, he absolves them. In fact, he not only absolves them, he acknowledges that the hand of God has been at work throughout his entire life, including in his experience of their evildoing, and that immeasurable good has come

out of that experience. What's more, he reiterates the point, "It was not you who sent me here but God" (Genesis 45:8).

It's tempting to read this and say, "See! Everything that happens, even the truly evil and monstrous, is all part of God's plan." That's tempting, but it's bad theology if not taken with an extreme degree of nuance. It can lead to things like the horrifying proclamation from a megachurch pastor in Atlanta a few years ago. It was a couple of weeks after the tragic murder of George Floyd. This pastor was part of a roundtable discussion, and in talking about slavery in this country he employed the theology of the Joseph story to say:

"that slavery was awful, of course, but that—like all things—it must have been part of God's design, and part of its effect was to build a society that brought much blessing and prosperity to white people. So, instead of saying that slavery manifested 'white privilege,' he proposed that we call the impact of slavery 'white blessing.'"

(Timothy McNinch)

Not only is this blatantly racist, it makes God into a monster, perpetrating suffering and horror in some people's lives for the benefit of others.

Professor Timothy McNinch from Christian Theological Seminary does a great job of drawing out some of the nuance of this part of the Joseph story. McNinch points out that:

"even though Joseph credits God with using his brothers' treachery to save Egypt and, by extension, Jacob's whole clan, he still names their sin, saying, 'I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.'" (Genesis 45:4)

Along with naming their sin, Joseph also doesn't forgive immediately. He only reveals himself after he has determined that his brothers have changed.

"Joseph looked for some growth in character among his brothers before offering them reconciliation"

(McNinch)

Last:

"Joseph even requires a kind of 'reparation' or 'restorative justice' for his brothers' betrayal in that they—the ones who sold Joseph away out of jealousy for their father's love—are tasked by Joseph with reporting all of his successes to their father."

(McNinch)

Their penance, as it were, was to come clean to their father. Joseph acknowledges that God's hand was at work even when his brothers sold him into slavery, but human agency, culpability, and accountability are not erased. The brothers' evil actions aren't what is Godly here. What is divine is that Joseph is never separate from God's love. That Joseph is able to ward off their evil with a countermove that brings grace to countless people is providential. Joseph lives grace.

## **Conclusion**

Which brings us back full circle to integrity. Joseph could have made his brothers pay for the 20+ years of struggle and hell that he went through. He could have given them a taste of their own medicine. No one would have begrudged him if he made them pay for what they'd done.

What makes this story divine is that he didn't. He elevated his behavior beyond tit-for-tat, beyond an eye for an eye, to living mercy and compassion and healing and grace. He loved his enemies. He did good to those who hated him. He blessed those who cursed him.

Friends, living lives of integrity, trusting in the providence of God, is a long game. Someone told me of an interview she heard this week that said that it's too much of a luxury at this time to live the axiom, "When they go low, we go high." The argument was that the stakes are too high, that we need to fight fire with fire. Today's scriptures adamantly refute that. They tell us that if we allow ourselves to be drawn down to the evil behaviors of evildoers, we're no better than them.

I'll close out with one final story. Years ago, the Milwaukee Public School Board was debating whether to offer Domestic Partner Benefits to same sex couples. There was a public hearing held in a massive auditorium. Hundreds of people were in attendance and there were very strict rules for offering testimony. I went and registered to testify.

It's funny. Though I make my living doing public speaking, though I'm up here Sunday after Sunday, in that context I was shaking in my boots. I was terrified. My voice cracked. And when I finished and walked back to my seat which was toward the back of the auditorium, the crowd jeered. They yelled and screamed and cursed at me.

And you know what I did? I'm proud to say that I am so steeped in these scriptures, in the ways of God and Jesus, that as they stood and booed and pointed, I blessed them. I walked slowly and deliberately, looking the most hateful in the eye, and blessed them.

The witness of our scriptures today is that God's hand is at work, even now. And as followers of Jesus, we are called to lives of integrity and blessing. It is only by using both God's methods and God's message that the world will change.

My prayer this week is that, despite the temptation to meet hate with hate more and more and more people will lean into these ways of grace. The tables will turn, my friends, not through hate, but through grace. May it be so. Alleluia and Amen.

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**Genesis 45:3-15; Luke 6:27-36**  
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