

## A different point of view

Genesis 45:1-15

August 14, 2005

So tell me ... is the glass of water in my hand half empty or half full?

Of course, both are true. The fact is that water occupies half the capacity of the glass, but there are two ways of describing that fact. We say that optimists see the glass as half full and pessimists see the glass as half empty. There are two ways of looking at the glass.

In similar fashion, there are two ways of looking at the events and circumstances of our lives.

- *It's true that my bicycle was stolen from my garage, but at least they didn't break into the house.*
- *You're upset you're paying \$2.25/gallon for gasoline? Be glad you don't live in the Netherlands. You'd be paying \$6.50 a gallon!*
- *Yes, they did have to remove your leg, but you still have two strong hands and a strong mind and a strong heart!*

There are two ways of looking at everything.

Or are there more than two ways? What if we looked at this glass, not just from the other side, but from a wholly different point of view? Instead of seeing in my hand a glass half empty or a glass half full, can you see in my hand the glass itself, the glass that exists, a fine and functional glass capable of holding water or whatever else we might want to fill it with?

Can you look at the events and circumstances of your own life and see not just the bad or good things that have happened to you, but see that there is indeed a "you" to which they have happened, a "you" capable of living with freedom and joy regardless of what befalls you? Can you look at the threads of your own history and see the grace and mercy of God at work, always at work? There are optimists; there are pessimists; and then, there are people of faith, people of faith who see things from a wholly different point of view.

Joseph was a person of faith. You remember Joseph's story ... Joseph was the son of Jacob and Rachel, one of twelve sons born to Jacob, but one of only two born to Rachel. Jacob loved Joseph dearly, much to the chagrin of his brothers. And when Joseph came to check on his brothers one day as they were tending Jacob's livestock, they grabbed him, tore off his robe, threw him in a ditch, and sold him as a slave to a band of merchants that happened by. He was taken from Canaan to Egypt where he was resold to an officer of the king of Egypt

There Joseph was praised, betrayed, jailed, consulted, acclaimed, and finally appointed governor over all Egypt, answerable only to the king. That's the short version of the story! Under Joseph's leadership, the nation of Egypt made preparations for the great famine that was to come. And when the famine did come, Joseph's brothers came from Canaan to Egypt, seeking food to buy. They were granted an audience with the one in charge of the distribution of grain -- Joseph himself! They did not recognize their brother, but he knew them.

And so the tables have turned and fate has put these jealousy-crazed siblings into Joseph's hands. He would have every right to be bitter, every right to be angry, every right to seek vengeance. He does play with their minds a bit, taking advantage of their ignorance of his identity to make them squirm and fear his wrath. But he can only stand so much of that, and before long Joseph dismisses his servants, breaks into sobs, and reveals himself to his brothers. He welcomes them, embraces them, loves them. forgives them.

Why? Why does Joseph welcome them, embrace them, love them, forgive them? Because Joseph sees the events of his life from a different point of view. It is not just that he looks on the brighter side: *Sure you sold me into slavery, but I landed on my feet ... so, no problem!* No, Joseph is no optimist, but a person of faith: *It was really God who sent me ahead of you to save people's lives ...*

Whoa! It's not about Joseph at all or about what happened to him. It's about saving people's lives. People's lives: the lives of Joseph's family, yes, but the lives of Egyptian people, too, and the lives of all who come to Egypt seeking assistance. Joseph's sees his own life through the eyes of faith and understands it's not all about him. It's about the deeper and broader mystery of the will of God ... and it is always the will of God to save people!

Joseph's brothers did a bad thing. Their treatment of him was despicable and inexcusable, even if Joseph urges them not to blame themselves. But the eyes of faith see beyond the choices -- good and evil -- that we make and see the choices God makes. Human beings conspired to sell Joseph into slavery, but God used these events to save people from starvation and death. Because Joseph is in Egypt, his family, the descendants of Abraham, may come to Egypt too and live. And so they did.

But you know that the end of this story is only the beginning of another story. There is no *happily ever after* for the descendants of Abraham, at least not yet. Is there ever in this life a *happily ever after*?

In time, living in Egypt proved a curse, not a blessing. The king died, Joseph died, and the hospitality of the rulers of Egypt turned to suspicion and mistreatment and oppression, and God once more needed to rescue the descendants of Abraham. The story of that rescue, the exodus from Egypt, the emancipation of the Hebrew slaves, becomes the foundational story of the Hebrew nation. They identify themselves as the people God brought out of slavery in Egypt into a promised land.

But, ironically, Joseph's story, a salvation story too, tells how they got into Egypt in the first place! So why would God bring them into Egypt only to have to save them again by bringing them out of Egypt? The question is too simplistic. From the human point of view, Joseph came to Egypt because his brothers hated him, his family was enslaved in Egypt because the rulers feared them. But from a wholly different point of view, people of faith recognize God at work, in and alongside and above human choice, saving and calling and forming a people to be his own.

What is the foundational story of our nation? Surely it is the story of our declaration of independence from our colonial masters and the forging of a new constitutional government based on inalienable human rights and the rule of law. But each American generation has its own foundational story, too, a story that gives shape to its way of thinking about itself and about the world.

For one generation, it was the Great Depression and the ways individual families and a nation of families were able to rise up from the economic ashes.

For another generation, it was World War II and how we won, prevailing with strength and will and ingenuity and sacrifice against dark forces that threatened the freedom and well-being of the rest of the world.

For still another generation, the foundational story was the war in Viet Nam, and how we lost, not just the war, but something of our dignity and our trust in government as well.

And the foundational story of this generation? It would have to be the events of September 11, 2001. It is hard to believe that in just a few weeks, we will mark the fourth anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. This would have to be our foundational story because we commonly talk about recent history as occurring before 9/11 or after 9/11.

The events of that day so captured our national imagination because they were unprecedented. The myth of our invulnerability was shattered. Symbols of national pride were targeted and pierced. We saw that this was no random act of some demented individual, but a calculated and coordinated attack on our whole way of life. It was but one skirmish in an ongoing war, a war with seemingly no end in sight.

We have every right to be bitter, every right to be angry, every right to seek vengeance ... But is this our only option? Is it possible -- is it possible -- to see these events from a wholly different point of view? Not to see the brighter side, because there is no brighter side. Not to absolve any one or any ones from responsibility, because there are people who surely must bear the guilt of this despicable act. But is it possible to see the events of September 11 from a different point of view, through the eyes of faith? How would Joseph read the signs of these times? What would Jesus say?

Can we see God at work, in and alongside and above human choice, saving and calling and forming a people to be his own?

- People who understand that we are not in control and never were ...
- People who understand that no matter how hard we try or how much we spend or whatever limits we put on human liberties, we can never guarantee our own security ...
- People who understand that, for better or worse, we share this planet with all kinds of other people -- all kinds ...
- People who understand that the fact that we share this planet is for better!
- People who understand that God chooses to bless all peoples, to save all nations, to judge all people with justice and with mercy ...
- People who understand that because God chooses save all nations, we need to learn how to live together ...

As people of faith -- not as Americans, but as Christians -- can we see the foundational story of our generation, the story of terrorism and the war on terrorism, from a different point of view? Can we see it as a call for self-examination and repentance, because it is much too simplistic to see only good guys and bad guys? Can we see it as a call to do justice, because it is much too naïve to think that there is not evil in this world, just unhappy people? There is real evil, people do real evil, but people of faith are called to overcome evil with good. Can we see it as a call to proclaim the Good News of God's salvation -- justice for the poor and the oppressed, forgiveness for the guilty, healing for the sick and broken, welcome to all?

As people of faith, can we do our best to walk the path of obedience, to follow Jesus' way of humility and sacrifice and compassion, and, at the same time, remember that it is not about us? The future of the human race is not in our hands, it is in God's hands. Thanks be to God!

So is the glass half empty or half full? Who cares? It is a cup of blessing, so drink up! There's more to come!