

Seventh Sunday after the Epiphany—Year C
Genesis 45:3-11, 15
Psalm 37:1-12, 41-42
I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50
Luke 6:27-38

We've got some intense emotions today!

Just take the **psalm**—lots of talk of **anger** and **rage** and **fretting**.

There's **Joseph** and **his brothers** and the flood of emotion unleashed after years of not seeing one another. **The brothers fearing what might be coming**, and most certainly was deserved **having sold their brother into slavery**, and then their being completely thrown by **Joseph's gracious response**.

The sheer **lack of imagination** in I Corinthians that **can't conceive of how the dead are raised and with what kind of body are they raised**.

And the **crazy counsel of Jesus** to **love your enemies** and **do good to those who hate you** and to **bless those who curse you** and to **pray for those who abuse you**. *Ludicrous!* It boggles the mind. Our little *reptilian brains* want to *take down our enemies* and *see the haters get their just rewards*; our *primitive instincts* want to *curse the cursers* and *send the abusers to the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth*.

It is **easy to get swamped by our emotions** and **start plotting the demise of those who've hurt us**. It's **easy to start plotting our takedowns and comebacks**, and even if we *never* speak these hurtful words, we can spend hours *ruminating* on them, **carefully nursing their spark** until we've **fanned their flames** into a **roaring blaze** that **sucks all the energy and oxygen out of our heart**.

The counsel of the **psalmist** is there for a reason. **"Do not fret yourself"** appears **3 times** in those **14 verses** we recited this morning. And the word for **"fret"** doesn't mean "worry" like I thought it did; to **"fret"** is *"to be hot, to burn, to kindle anger"*—this is that **red hot anger** that makes your **cheeks grow red**, makes your **blood boil**, and takes your **brain straight off-line**. And this call **"not to fret"** is surrounded by counsel to **"refrain from anger"**—in the Hebrew, that kind of **anger** that makes you *"breathe fast and makes your nostrils flare"*—and counsel to **"leave rage alone"**—**"rage,"** that *"burning anger full of heat and poison and venom that comes upon you like a fever."*

The **psalmist** knows too well the **danger** of all this **red-hot fretting-anger-rage energy** that takes our **frontal cortex**, our **executive function**, *straight off-line*, leaving us so **vulnerable** to our **four most primitive instincts**—the instinct to **fight back** (highly likely when we're dealing with **rage** and **anger**), or to **run away** (because it just takes *too much energy to engage*), or to **freeze** (because we're *overwhelmed* and *we shut down*), or the instinct to **appease** (because we *can't stomach this much conflict*). **None** of these four responses will take us where we want to go because **all of this arises** when our *thinking brain has gone off-line*. But it is so **deliciously tempting** to get **bogged down** in **fretting** and **raging** because **they are full of energy**, and *energy can make us feel alive*. But it's the **energy of a sugar high**—*it won't last*, and *it will leave us feeling pretty lousy when the crash comes*.

It's **normal** to feel **red-hot emotions** when **some hurt comes our way** or we **witness something that strikes us as so unjust**. Such **emotion** is an **indicator** that **something is amiss and needs to be addressed**. These **emotions** are **great alarms**, but they are *lousy lifestyles*. **Drinking in anger**, **eating a**

steady diet of *rage, fretting* to fuel our reason for getting up in the morning is *NOT* a recipe for the abundant, generous, spacious living and loving into which Jesus invites us. And it's so hard to see this right now because so much of our culture supports and encourages this fad diet of *anger, rage,* and *fretting*.

But it's a poor substitute for the kind of depth and grace that's *possible* when we “refrain from these things” and “leave them alone.” When we can, as the psalmist counsels, “be still before the Lord” and “wait patiently for him,” when we can “commit our way to the Lord and put our trust in him,” a *world of possibilities* opens up.

Take Joseph. I'm imagining that he spent a good long while **fuming at his brothers for what they had done to him**, but *somewhere along the way*, he **made peace with his circumstances**. And who knows, that may have even **opened up the space for him to see his piece in his brothers' envy and actions**—after all, **Joseph was a bit arrogant**. And, as **God continued to work on his heart**, Joseph could begin to see a **larger plan at work**, a **larger vision**, even being able to tell his brothers not to be distressed or angry *with themselves* because of that they had done to him because he could see how God used these events to **preserve life**. Wow! *That* is some kind of **expansive vision**, *that* is the **proclamation of an expanded heart and soul blown open**. **Red-hot rage, flaring-nostril anger, fretting will not get you there—they just won't**—because such **transformation** is a **full body, full spirit, full mind, full heart endeavor**; and it's one that **takes time** and **often moves slowly**. Again, our **fast-paced culture** is often *far too impatient* for **this kind of slow soul work**.

Paul gets this; Paul so gets this. He recognizes the impatience of the question, “**How are the dead raised? With what kind of body will they come?**” *My brain can't imagine it, so I've got to dismiss it and consign it to the impossible.*

Paul's answer takes us in a whole different direction reminding us **how growth actually occurs**. **You don't sow the body that is to be, but a bare seed**. You can't see in the seed what is to come, *but come it will, if given time, space, nurture*. “**What is sown is perishable, what is raised is imperishable. Sown in dishonor, raised in glory. Sown in weakness, raised in power. Sown a physical body, raised a spiritual one**”—says Paul. In each instance, you *can't see what it will become*; you *can't imagine what it will become*; in fact, it looks quite dire—weak, dishonorable, impermanent. And then, there's the **hard truth** that **whatever is sown just can't come to life without doing some dying in the process**. The seed has got to **shed its body to find its new form**.

Oh, I just wish **dying** weren't a part of this process of **transformation** because **dying to whatever we have to die to** is **just plain hard**. But this is the **price** to be paid to **step into the larger frame** that can say things like **Joseph will say in chapter 50 of Genesis**—“**Even though you intended to do me harm, God intended it for good.**” This **dying** is the **costly price** that **allows us to set aside our red-hot lust for revenge and retribution** and **opens us to the deeper freedom** that comes when you can **actually love your enemies and do good and bless and pray**, instead of *paying the ransom exacted by the myth of redemptive violence*, that *diabolical lie* that repeats like that irritating song that you can't get out of your head, “*if I can just get you back for the pain you have caused, I'll somehow feel better.*”

It's so easy to **make the mistake of believing** that *what is possible is limited by what we can see before our eyes*, but the **deeper work of the soul** always **takes place in the hidden places**, takes place *deep in the soil* where roots tap **deeper sources of strength and wisdom and life** that come from *way beyond our own capacities*.

What is **needed from us** is a **willingness to yield** and **trust** and our *choice* to leave the hotter, more seductive energies *alone*. Oh, we'll still feel them—we are *human after all*—but the **choice to cling to them** and caress them *OR release them rests in our hands*. The **choice to trust** and **believe in what we cannot see rests with us**. The **willingness to die to the ways that keep us stuck**, *that is a willingness that we can sow throughout our lives*, and *that's the kind of soil that God can so work with*.

I don't fully understand how one loves certain kinds of enemies, or does good to those who have caused such harm; I struggle to comprehend how one blesses those who curse you or how you pray for someone who has abused you, but I DO know when we are raging and fretting, we are not free people and our lives are small and constrained. I DO know that rage and anger and fretting can take all the oxygen out of our lives and leave us feeling so empty and drained. I DO know that stepping into the larger frame, and seeing the twists and turns of our lives, from God's vantage point where there are no detours but only more possibilities to work transformation, I DO know that seeing life from that vantage point offers the most freedom and the deepest capacity to love and experience the peace that passes all understanding.

We may long to know, as the Corinthians did, "But HOW does it happen?" But truly, that's not near as important as trusting that it CAN. It is a leap of faith to believe that something powerful, beautiful, glorious, and fruitful CAN come out of these seeds as they die in the dark and give way to the process unfolding within and around them. THAT is an act of supreme trust.

"Refrain from anger, leave rage alone, do not fret yourselves—it only leads to evil."

Release those energies, let them die, and trust in the power of what can be raised in the space that opens up.

There is a love deeper *to be discovered*, a life more abundant *to be lived*.

It is **costly to find it**, but *once found*, the **currency of anger and rage and fretting won't be near enough to satisfy your heart's desire**. Amen.

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