

Pentecost 17
September 10 & 11, 2005
Sermon

It was December of my senior year at Roanoke College and I was a wreck. I'd been planning a life as a great historian of medieval Russia. Not much of a dream, but it was mine. My library was brimming, my language skills were superb, and I was a wreck. I was also a philosophy major—another useful skill—and at the philosophy department Christmas party I told one of my philosophy professors that I was having second thoughts about this whole Russian History thing. He said to me, matter-of-factly, “You cannot escape your destiny.” Only, it sounded to me more like the voice of Darth Vader enticing Luke Skywalker to join the dark side. “You cannot escape your destiny.” Those words shook me to the core, because, intentionally or not, they told me, “Yes, Leitzke, God is working on you.” You see, for my senior seminar in philosophy we finished the semester reading Martin Luther's ominously titled work, *On the Bondage of the Will*. In one place Luther writes, “Christians are not led by a free will, but are driven by the Spirit of God. To be driven is not to act or do oneself, but we are so seized as a saw or an ax is handled by a carpenter.” The words haunted me. Yes Leitzke, God has his hooks in you; you cannot escape your destiny. I realized it, slowly and painfully: things were not going to go the way that I had planned. What I had to do was figure out what God was calling me to do.

Our reading from Genesis is the classic tale of God's plans trumping those of people. God spoke to Joseph in dreams. At the beginning of Joseph's story,

Joseph dreamt and told it to his brothers. “Here, we were binding sheaf-bundles out in the field, and here, my sheaf arose, and it was standing upright, and here, your sheaves were circling round and bowing down to my sheaf!” Joseph’s brothers responded by trying to kill him, then abandoning him to slavery. Now decades later Joseph is master of Egypt’s grain supply and his starving brothers are falling before him just as God had said in the dream. The brothers could not escape the will of God. Even in their scheming and conspiring God was working. Joseph sums it up in the timeless line, “You planned evil, but God planned-it-over for good.” God took the attempted murder of Joseph and used it to feed Joseph’s starving brothers, his people Israel. Did God plan to kill Joseph? No. God necessarily moves and works even in Satan and wicked people. God used that terrible act for good. The opportunity for Joseph to grow up happily with his brothers was taken from him. What he could do, what he had to do, was figure out what God was calling him to do in the wake of evil.

Friends of Christ the message of Joseph’s story is that God redeems the evil. God sanctifies the evil, turning it into good. By the sins of Jacob’s sons God saves Jacob’s sons from starvation. Of course that’s the Bible. What of today? We are all acutely aware that this is the fourth anniversary of the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. Why did it happen? The world is sinful. The terrorists planned evil. What we have to do is figure out what good God is calling us to do in the wake of this evil. Today our attention might be more focused on the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Why did it happen? In this sinful world hurricanes

happen. In this sinful world we care more about ourselves than we do about others, even if that means that others are in harm's way. What we have to do is figure out what good God is calling us to do. God didn't send the hurricane or the terrorists, but God will work in the midst of the destruction that they wrought. The world we knew before those calamities is gone, but the Reign of God is coming. You cannot escape your destiny.

Friends of Christ, the business of the Reign of God is forgiveness. Joseph has every right to retribution, but retribution consumes us. It tortures us. It demands all of our energy and its demands never stop. We are in bondage to Sin and Sin's only recourse to wrongdoing is an endless cycle of retribution. We can never possibly do well enough to each other, and we can never possibly live up to what God expects of us, but God loves us anyway, and God breaks this cycle. In Jesus the Christ God forgives each of us for all of our sins, and that forgiveness frees us. We are no longer bound to the cycle of retribution because God has broken the cycle. We are like the first slave in Jesus' parable. We are forgiven into the capacity to forgive. As God has forgiven us all we've done now we have the freedom to forgive others their sins. The cycle of retribution fixes nothing, solves nothing, and destroys everything. The love of God present in forgiveness heals and renews and restores a broken world. As Friends of Christ we are called into the Reign of God and its business of forgiveness to all people no matter what.

Now understand: I'm not saying that society cannot seek and demand justice. We as Christians must not confuse justice with our own arrogant and vain

attempts to defeat evil by force, or confuse justice with our lust for retribution. When we do that we reject God's forgiveness to us. We've seen God at work in the midst of terrible events. We saw the firefighters and rescue workers at Ground Zero. We've seen the cities offering shelter to refugees of Katrina. We've seen the outpouring of aid, including our own ELCA disaster response. In these things God is at work, wielding the gospel, God's power for the salvation of everyone. The business of the Reign of God is forgiveness.

When Joseph's attempted murderers fall down before him he has every right to retribution, but retribution consumes us. It is not the will of God, and when we're not in line with God life is miserable. Joseph forgives his brothers. He cannot go back in time and undo the evil that has happened. What he can do is forgive. He can do the good that God is calling him to do. Our lives draw parallels with Joseph's. Maybe there's a sibling to whom we won't speak. Maybe there's a neighbor with whom we are constantly at odds. Maybe chapters of our lives were closed unexpectedly or unfairly. We cannot go back and undo the pain and suffering. We can do God's work of forgiveness. When Joseph forgives his brothers he restores the right relationships with them. In Christ God forgives us and restores our relationship with God. When we forgive we restore our relationships. We restore God's design. We let ourselves be driven by God, as Luther writes, to be handled by God as a carpenter handles a saw or an ax. The business of the Reign of God is forgiveness. You cannot escape your destiny.

What forgiveness is God calling this congregation to do? What forgiveness is God calling *you* to do?

Amen.