

Sermon | Feast of Martin Luther King, Jr.
Genesis 37:17b-20, Luke 6:27-36 | The Rev. Barnabas Pusnur | January 15, 2023

"There is a power in love that our world has not discovered yet... For they believe in hitting for hitting; they believe in an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; they believe in hating for hating; but Jesus comes to us and says, "This isn't the way."" Words of Martin Luther King Jr. from a sermon he preached titled "Loving your enemies."

This isn't the way! Then how, how my fellow Christians, how are we to respond when we're hated, when we're despised, detested, to the extent that harm is intended on us? What do we do in response to hate? Here hate is more than simply being disliked. Hate here is a loathing that desires the harm and destruction of the one who is hated.

This morning I'd like to reflect on the life of the Old Testament character Joseph, and I like to look at his life through the lens of the sermon that King preached. Because I think Joseph's life story provides a great example of the way of Jesus that King preached about.

In today's Genesis account Joseph goes looking for his brothers, and the brothers see him at a distance and conspire to kill him. Why did they want to kill him? According to the story, it is because they hated him. The story reads: "They hated him and could not speak a kind word to him." They hated him out of jealousy. They knew their father loved this young boy above others, because this Joseph was born to his father in his old age. Joseph was a young teenager, but they hated him out of jealousy.

Hate colored how they saw Joseph. It also didn't help that Joseph had a prophetic dream where God showed him that Joseph would be lifted to such a powerful position that his family would bow to him. This

prophetic dream was to show how in the future Joseph would use his powerful position to rescue his family from a severe famine. For the brothers, the hatred which came out of jealousy, now led them to misunderstand the very intention of the prophetic dream. The account says: "they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words."

Hate had distorted their entire outlook. King in the same sermon says, "You just begin hating somebody, and you will begin to do irrational things. You can't see straight when you hate. You can't walk straight when you hate. You can't stand upright. Your vision is distorted... For the person who hates, the good becomes bad and the bad becomes good. For the person who hates, the true becomes false and the false becomes true. That's what hate does. You can't see right."

And so when this dreamer Joseph was sent by his father to go check on the well-being of his brothers, the brothers see him at a distance and decide to kill him. They say, "Here comes this dreamer." "We shall see what will become of his dreams." Joseph is seeking the wellbeing of his brothers, but he lives in a world of jealousy, of being misunderstood, of being hated. The brothers say, "Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits...we shall see what will become of his dreams."

King had a dream. King was a dreamer. King lived in a world of jealousy, misunderstanding, and hatred, and yet he dreamt of a world of freedom and equality for all human beings. For all because he firmly believed that all human beings without exception reflect the image of God. But hate battles that dream. While the dream

seeks flourishing of all, hate despises and works to harm.

Joseph pleaded for mercy and yet he was thrown into a pit in the wilderness to die without water. Hate had taken over. How does one respond to such hate?

Years later, when Joseph ends up with political power in the Egyptian kingdom, the superpower of the time, shouldn't Joseph go about hating those who hated him. Shouldn't he seek his brothers and bring them to justice? But King in his sermon says, "hate for hate only intensifies the existence of hate and evil in the universe. If I hit you and you hit me and I hit you back and you hit me back and go on, you see, that goes on ad infinitum. It just never ends. Somewhere somebody must have a little sense, and that's the strong person. The strong person is the person who can cut off the chain of hate, the chain of evil."

Cutting off the chain of hate is not a passive acceptance of hate. Cutting off the chain is an annihilation of hate. How does one destroy hate? How does one resist hate? To cut off hate, needs strength. It needs extraordinary strength. To not to resist hate with hate needs God's strength. It is an act of God. When we resist with love, we show that we are engaging in something divine. There is nothing extraordinary in loving those who love us. The stakes are much higher when we are called to resist hatred with love.

Joseph does not actively seek his brothers to harm them. However, years later when they do appear before him needing his help, he has a strong urge to punish them. He speaks harshly to them and tries to cause them grief and trouble. But ultimately, he chooses to

destroy all that hatred with love and he helps them and his father escape the famine and settles them down in Egypt.

Resisting hate with love sounds foolish and weak. It is also very very hard. King knew that. Loving when you are hated does sound impractical. It looked impractical in Jesus' time, it looked impractical in King's time, and it looks impractical today. Yet, King believed in the words of Jesus: 'Love your enemies'. Many honor King but find it hard to take his words about love seriously. But King truly believed that love is a powerful act of resistance because love has power—it has redemptive power. Love has a mysterious power to transform, to restore, and to bring new life. Ultimately, Joseph's relationship with his brothers was restored. The last chapter of the book of Genesis recounts the death of Joseph's father after some years in Egypt. The death of the father leads the brothers to panic again. They ask, "'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?'" But love had destroyed hatred. They begged for forgiveness one more time, and Joseph reassured them and told them with love: "have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones."

This is the way of love. This is the mysterious power of love. This is the divine act we're all called to. Joseph's life reminds us of the life of Jesus. Hated by many but won over that hatred with love. Love perfected in Jesus is the example, the healing, and the salvation we seek. The life and legacy of Martin Luther King shines the light on this Jesus and his way of love. May we be the people who resist hatred with love. Amen.