

“Neighbors”

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Gen. 45:1-15

Matt. 15:10-28

[Joseph said to his brothers,]

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God;

[God] has made me a father to Pharaoh,

and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

Gen. 45:8

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to be good neighbors in a multicultural, religiously pluralistic,
gender-specific, and ethnically diverse world.

Amen

This afternoon, I’ll be starting out on a trip north –

after the Cook Out/Eat in, of course, and it will be a kind of pilgrimage.

And I will stop in to visit with family & friends along the way –

some I haven’t seen in many, many years.

When I arrive in MA, I will be staying at first with friends

whom I have known since I was six years old – more than 50 years.

The Pratts were neighbors to my Dad’s parents –

a young family then with three boys and a girl

and their second oldest son, Joel, is my age.

I remember the anticipation I felt when my Dad would drive us up from NJ
for a weekend visit to my grandparents

and the excitement I felt as we made that last turn onto

Pleasant Circle where they lived.

I am reminded of that joy and have felt that way often

when I drive here to church, seeing the first glimpse of our steeple,

and coming through that canopy of trees and Spanish moss.

I loved being with my grandparents and my friend Joel,

and I loved the place itself – a bungalow,

yellow-ochre with black trim, under huge evergreens

with a deep forest behind that you couldn’t see through.

I loved that place and the people.

Willard, p.2

One of the great life lessons that I have carried with me ever since,
was the example of the friendship between
the Pratt family and my Nana & Grampy –
and that lesson was simply that younger people could be friends
with older people.

The Pratts were good neighbors to my grandparents
and I have made it a point to remember their kindness
in my ministry with seniors over the years.

This time last year,
I shared another example with you about good neighbors
from my life experience.

It was during our first service here in our new building
when I told you all about the friendship between
my family and our neighbors, the Salants.

I was 4 when we moved as a family from MA to NJ
into a house on Sprague Ave, South Plainfield –
the same week that a Jewish family moved in right next door.

At that time,
they had one son, David, and we were the same age.
Our folks formed a friendship that has lasted ever since,
but it took the perspective of thirty years to recognize
something remarkable about that friendship.

Our parents agreed to build a fence – made of rounded wood posts;
But this fence went around both houses with no fence between
– just a gate that opened to the fields beyond.

I have never heard of two families – who weren't directly related,
doing something like this. Have you?

And last year this second Sunday of August,
I spoke of my family's relationship with our Jewish neighbors
because of its ready comparison with this congregation's
relationship with the synagogue up the street.

For three years we met at Temple Shalom – The New Jewish Congregation
who hosted us so that we would have a place to worship.
And when this building was finally constructed and ready for us to move in,
we made our Kadimah/Pilgrimage just a mile down the road.
We had our last service there and our friends at Temple Shalom
sang us out, walked along with us, and sang us in.

Willard, p.3

They themselves had started that way –
meeting at the house of worship of another religion.
They met at the United Methodist Church in Oxford
and that was a good experience for them
and it was from there that they walked 2 miles for their Kadimah.

Sheldon Skurow – who serves Temple Shalom as rabbi,
told me about how – when they first gathered,
and were searching for a place to meet,
they approached a conservative fundamentalist church.
That church initially agreed to give them space at their building to worship,
but with one condition – that they accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.

How uncharitable and narrow-minded to challenge Jewish people that way –
when Jesus himself was willing to meet people whoever they were
and wherever they were on their journey of life.
And if we are to take a literal interpretation of today's Gospel lesson,
even Jesus had prejudices – in this case, against the Greeks
who only a few hundred years before had
desecrated the Temple when they conquered Jerusalem.
But Jesus discarded those prejudices as he came to know one of these people –
a woman of the neighboring region of Syro-Phoenicia.

Sheldon told me about that unfortunate encounter with a church as were riding
to a meeting with Imam Abdurrahman Sykes of Islam, Inc.
to plan our "Peace Sunday" service.
Those of you who attended remember that event
was quite a jump for us all.
We planned for how a Jewish rabbi and Muslim imam
were going to participate in a Christian service of worship
and not compromise anybody's faith.
And those of you who were here saw that it worked.
And it worked because we made room for each other.

There are ways to be different without having to build a fence.
And those differences allow us to see a broader vision
not only of who we are, but who God is.

Willard, p.4

Perhaps one day there will be peace in the Middle East –
that troubled land of sibling rivalry.

It is written into the story of the Biblical tradition
that is respected by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam alike
that reconciliation is possible and
that it is by God's purpose that we are brought to that place.

And when we make God's purpose our own,
then we are making room for the stranger
and allowing people to be who they are going to be.

The Pratts of MA and the Salants of NJ are like family to me now.
There is a fence that goes around them still, with no fence between.
Amen

Our lesson from Genesis 45:1-15 is the conclusion of Joseph's journey from slavery in Egypt to become Pharaoh's chief administrator and how he met up with his brothers again...

45:1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.'

So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

³Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?'

But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

⁴ Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.'

And they came closer. He said,

'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here;

for God sent me before you to preserve life.

⁶For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither ploughing nor harvest.

⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

⁸So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

⁹Hurry and go up to my father and say to him,

"Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.

¹⁰You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

¹¹I will provide for you there— since there are five more years of famine to come— so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty."

¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.

¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honoured in Egypt,

and all that you have seen.

Hurry and bring my father down here.'

¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept,
while Benjamin wept upon his neck.

¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them;
and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matt. 15:10-28

10 Then he called the crowd to him and said to them,

‘Listen and understand:

¹¹it is not what goes into the mouth that defiles a person,
but it is what comes out of the mouth that defiles.’

¹²Then the disciples approached and said to him,

‘Do you know that the Pharisees took offence
when they heard what you said?’

¹³He answered,

‘Every plant that my heavenly Father has not planted
will be uprooted.

¹⁴Let them alone; they are blind guides of the blind.

And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit.’

¹⁵But Peter said to him,

‘Explain this parable to us.’

¹⁶Then he said,

‘Are you also still without understanding?

¹⁷Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth
enters the stomach, and goes out into the sewer?

¹⁸But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,
and this is what defiles.

¹⁹For out of the heart come evil intentions,
murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander.

²⁰These are what defile a person,
but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile.’

²¹ Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

²²Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out
and started shouting,

‘Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is tormented by a demon.’

²³But he did not answer her at all.

And his disciples came and urged him, saying,

‘Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us.’

²⁴He answered,

‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.’

²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying,

‘Lord, help me.’

²⁶He answered,

‘It is not fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs.’

²⁷She said,

‘Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs
that fall from their masters’ table.’

²⁸Then Jesus answered her,

‘Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish.’
And her daughter was healed instantly.