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Proper 15 – August 17, 2008
Genesis 45:1-15 (The story of Joseph)

When I was ordained a deacon,
a priest I know gave me a card with a quote from St. Julian, from a vision she
had of God's love:

First, I will give you that which you desire;

later, I will cause you to want it.

I have a very mixed relationship with those words.

I think it is true that the call God has for us is often to a life we never imagined we
would want.

But I have a hard time believing that the life God gives us will always be a sort of
bitter medicine full of struggles and confusion that are supposed to teach us
a lesson or harden us into seasoned disciples.

Joseph was sold into slavery.

And yet he says to his brothers, no – this is what God wanted.

You didn't do this to me, God did, so that he could save us all.

And I find that very hard, because I don't believe it is only through struggle that
God can work good.

St. Theresa of Avila was traveling between convents in Spain, almost five
hundred years ago, and her cart turned over while they were fording a river,

and she heard the voice of God say, “This is how I treat my friends!”

And she replied, “Well, Lord, it’s no wonder that you have so few!”

What does it mean that so many human beings wait and struggle?

What does it mean that Joseph had to be sold into slavery,

away from his family, imprisoned, and exiled for decades,

to do God’s will?

I do believe there is something about waiting for God,

something about persevering through dry times,

about facing evil,

about living without the answers,

that is somehow essential to becoming the human beings God wants us to be,

for ourselves and for each other.

When I was in my early twenties, I’d already had a stint at being a pastor (I was a sort of interim pastor in a small rural church in Massachusetts).

But after a year, I was too lonely to continue, so I came back to Chicago and starting working as a secretary for a law firm. And it wasn’t where I thought I should be – I knew I was waiting for something.

But I had a hard time waiting.

And I was anxious – anxious to have what I wanted to have:

anxious to get to the next stage of my life.

And during that time, all sorts of people told me, “You know, this is going to happen to you over and over again in your life.”

But I wanted it to go away – and so I did things like apply for a job as the caretaker of a remote retreat center, applied to live in a intentional community in Missouri with buildings made out of soda-pop cans, thought about moving to Scotland and working in the kitchens of the Christian social justice community on the island of Iona.

I wanted to get to the next stage of my life, and I was looking in all sorts of magical places for it.

And I was miserable. Because I couldn’t stop worrying about myself.

Now compared to Joseph, and to many people, I had what my friend Steve would call “lucky problems.”

But had God actually already given me what I wanted? “First, I will give you that which you desire.”

I don’t know. But I remember that I was yearning and yearning for something I didn’t have. And I kept looking around outside myself for what that might be.

What should I have done?

What did Joseph do?

I think of a woman I heard interviewed on the radio, about her parents’ divorce when she was nine years old. She had wanted to know WHY, and she decided to ask as many adults as she could, to see what they thought.

She never got the answer she wanted: an answer that had to do with how they would get back together.

But that was never the answer she got. And as an adult, when the interviewer asked her, “What would you tell her, if you could?”

And the woman paused for a long time, and she said, “You know, I ask myself that question all the time. And I think I would say,

‘This is something that has happened to you,

and it wasn’t your choice, so you can’t change it.

But this is your life, and you can still choose what you’re going to do with it.’”

Maybe this is the difference between waiting impatiently, looking outside

ourselves for answers, and

really listening to what God might be doing around us, believing that God has a purpose for us, no matter what has been set before us.

It’s hard to wait, it’s hard to live through something, not knowing what might come next.

It’s hard to yearn for something, and feel as though God has no answer for you.

And I think this is true both as individual Christians, in our personal lives,

and maybe also as a Christian community, as the Church of St. Benedict.

This church has done a lot of waiting,

and a lot of looking around for who we should be.

But I think the answer already lies within us.

We don't need to worry about finding the right answer or the right program;
we need to discover what already lies within us.

Churches are not about programs or answers, they are about being the kingdom
of God on earth.

And being the kingdom of God on earth is both very hard and very easy.

It takes patience. It takes prayer. It takes trust in God's grace.

Where is God in our waiting, as individuals and as a church community?

This is not something we can discover quickly, not something that will just
magically appear.

We all need time, and prayer, and God's grace.

It will take all those things to allow us to be able to say, like Joseph, "it was God
who led us here, to preserve life."

May God grant us the patience and understanding to take our time,

to accept our yearnings as a gift,

and to trust that he will lead us to our desire,

and perhaps even cause us to want it!

Amen.