

13th Sunday after Pentecost Year A  
Sept. 11, 2011  
St. Luke Sheboygan Falls  
Genesis 50:15-21

God intended it for Good

Let us pray. On this tenth anniversary of the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> attacks we are reminded that we live in a world where evil exists and where bad things happen to good people. Give us continued trust in your presence, Lord, that you are always with us working to bring purpose and meaning and even hope out of the very worst of circumstances. AMEN.

Newsweek magazine has a back page column where famous people share stories about their “favorite mistake.” While I’m not a big fan of his movies, I was drawn to the article in a recent issue where film director, Kevin Smith discussed “the time he got kicked off a flight for being too fat.” After he had been seated on a Southwest Airlines flight, a woman came and told him he would have to disembark due to “safety issues.”

Once off the plane, Smith tweeted about what happened thinking that the media and public would take his side as the victim of a corporation that was messing with the average guy. Instead, the story spread all over the internet as “the fat guy in the little chair.”

Smith felt publically embarrassed. He was paralyzed. He didn’t want to go near an airport because he learned there was a paparazzi blog offering \$5000 for a photo of him seated in an airplane, \$10,000 for a photo of him eating a sandwich on a plane.

Now, I have no idea of Kevin Smith’s religious leanings, if he even has any faith at all, but this story reminded me of the Old Testament story of Joseph and his brothers. Joseph’s brothers were jealous that their parents seemed to favor him and so they had the worst of intentions when they sold him into slavery and let their parents

believe he was dead. Yet, God used the evil they did to allow Joseph to ascend to the highest rank in the Egyptian government so when his brothers unknowingly came to Egypt in a time of famine, Joseph could help them. ***“As for you, you went evil against me, but God used it for good.”***

A similar scenario happened in Kevin Smith’s story. In avoiding plane travel, he rented a tour bus to go on a promotional trip to Austin. That trip gave him the idea to promote his latest movie. He thought, *“I’ve got a \$4 million movie and a direct-to-fan relationship. Maybe I’ll just take it out myself. If I didn’t unfairly get kicked off that flight by Southwest, this never would have happened.”* What was a horrible experience for Kevin Smith was redeemed in the light of what he was able to do in the future. He could have allowed the insults others threw at him to bring his life to a standstill, but

instead, he took the next step and moved forward.

At the ELCA Churchwide Assembly, I ran into my former Bishop April Larson and her husband, Judd. I expressed my deepest sympathy to them in their loss of their son, Ben who was killed on a mission trip in last year’s terrible earthquake in Haiti. I mentioned that I had seen that their daughter-in-law, Ben’s young widow was preaching at the closing worship at the assembly.

That’s when Bishop Larson said to me that if there is anything good to have come out of the devastating pain of losing their son, it was the opportunity to get to know Pastor Renee Spichal Larson and to see her courage and faith bloom in the wake of this tragedy. Originally, the Larsons had planned not to attend this year’s assembly because they thought it would be

too hard. Then, Renee told them that she was going to be leading some of the music and preaching and they knew they had to be there to support her. A terrible, terrible event has resulted in a bond that cannot be broken. Even in the darkest of times, God has the power to bring forth a glimmer of light.

Today, as we commemorate the tenth anniversary of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the story of Joseph and his jealous brothers can offer us wisdom on how to cope and move forward in a world where evil, mistrust and hatred still exist.

First of all, Joseph's brothers were fully expecting Joseph to exact revenge upon them for selling him into slavery and allowing his parents to believe he was dead. That's why they made up the lie that their father instructed Joseph to forgive them.

Yet, in spite of everything his brothers did to him with all their hateful intentions Joseph was able to wipe the slate clean and forgive his brothers no questions asked.

***"Am I in the place of God?"*** Joseph wonders. What difference would it make if we all sought to forgive our enemies, as God forgives us? Much easier said than done—it is human nature to want revenge. Yet, in Joseph's case, when he forgave instead, the whole people of Israel was saved from famine.

Secondly, through all of the bad things that happened to him, Joseph had faith. He continued to trust in God, even when he was sold into slavery, when he was falsely accused of adultery and thrown into jail, he believed that God had not abandoned him. God had been with him all of his life in spite of appearances. ***"You,***

***brothers, intended harm to me, but God intended it for good.”***

This past week I've been following a series of articles in the [Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#) by Mike Nichols on Andrea Haberman, a West Bend native who was on a business trip working in the North Tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001 when the plane hit.

Even after the tragedy, her father Gordy who owned a restaurant in Mequon would call her cell phone and hear it ring and ring. One day after he hung up, the restaurant phone rang. It was a woman from New York wanting to buy gift certificates for Wisconsin clients. As they talked, Gordy learned that the caller had an aunt, Diane Lipari, who worked at the company where Andrea was visiting. It gave Gordy a feeling of relief to think that she may have met Diane before because she

had visited Andrea's company in Chicago. His daughter may not have been all alone in a strange place.

***“For almost every negative we encountered, something came through that continued our faith,” says Gordon Haberman. “Those little things kept on happening to us. Just when we were at our lowest, we would get some kind of phone call from somebody.”***

Not everyone would be able to see events in the way that Joseph and Gordon Haberman did. The key to moving on in the face of unspeakable grief and trauma is to envision and interpret events through the eyes of faith, not that God is the cause of evil, but has the power to turn around what has happened through the wrong intentions of others.

Finally, Joseph moves forward with Hope. He doesn't hold onto bad

feelings about the past. Instead, God has freed him to act with kindness and compassion to make a better future. ***“So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.”*** Trust in God enabled him to act not with hate and revenge, but to make a difference with love. The ball was in his court and he didn’t smash it back, but held it out to share and restore community with the ones who wronged him.

What about you? Do you want to continue to dwell in a bitter world of evil intentions or move forward and change the world with forgiveness and faith and hope?

AMEN.