

14th Week after Pentecost, Proper 15 – Year A – August 20, 2008
Genesis 45:1-15; Psalm 133; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32; Matthew 15: [10-20] 21-28
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According to one *Leave It To Beaver* fan website (www.leaveittobeaver.org) this popular family sit-com had 234 shows and ran from 1957 to 1963. Creators and writers Bob Mosher and Joe Connelly appear to have had several consistent themes and key moral messages embedded in each episode. We would be naïve to think that television does not greatly influence and educate each of us, willingly or unwillingly, in social and cultural norms. In fact, it does. Ask any ethicist and they will tell you this is true: you can do your best to raise your children and grandchildren with your Christian values or you can let television and society raise them with cultural values. Either way your children and grandchildren will grow and learn. According to this website's examination of the shows, there are six moral themes that run almost seamlessly through many episodes of this classic American family show. They are: obey/trust your parents, tell the truth, develop self-esteem, have pride in your family, help, or at a minimum, don't hurt others, and accept responsibility for your actions. My question for you is, "have you spotted the obvious missing piece?"

The interesting thing is that during the late 50s and early 60s, middle-class American culture had quite a close parallel with many Judeo-Christian values. We cannot say that this is still true, but at the time of *Leave It To Beaver*, a whole generation of kids and parents were shaped by values that pretty much approximate the Golden Rule – do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Of course, the problem with the Golden Rule is that it implies that individuals can be and do this for and on behalf of themselves, which does not leave room for the essential reality of our human lives. Whatever our grandiose notions may or may not be that we are in control of our lives, we are not, because the reality is that we live and breathe entirely through God's gracious will as His dependent creatures.

Clearly, the account of Joseph's family in the reading from Genesis this evening tells us they have a long way to go before coming close to matching any of the ideals and ideology promoted by middle-class American culture in shows like *Leave It To Beaver*. Feel free to correct me if I'm wrong, but I don't think the classic family values of obeying and trusting your parents and telling the truth includes selling your brother into slavery, faking his death, and lying about what really happened. The last time I checked that type of behavior does not come from God. What we see in tonight's reading from Genesis is a major section on the resolution of our dreamer's fate and the fulfillment of God's purpose in Joseph, despite the actions of his brothers. Unlike each nicely packaged episode of *Leave It To Beaver* this resolution has taken many years to come to fruition.

After Joseph's brothers returned home without him, bearing a blood-soaked and torn robe that belonged to their brother, their father Jacob's heart is torn in grief. The lies are eventually buried deep in guilty hearts, and life goes on, at least until the famine hits. Meanwhile, Joseph the dreamer has had some hard times, but has lately found great favor with the Pharaoh in Egypt after he accurately interprets Pharaoh's dreams. He prudently manages the bounteous harvests of the seven years of plenty to allow Egypt and others to survive the successive seven years of famine.

Hearing that there was grain in Egypt, Jacob sends Joseph's brothers to buy supplies for Israel. In this part of the text, we hear about the second trip to Egypt by Joseph's brothers. Joseph cannot contain himself. Be it joy in seeing his family, or a sense of family pride he takes the risky step of revealing himself to his brothers. They know, of course, that their mischief has finally caught up with them, and are wondering, no doubt, exactly how this powerful man before

them will hold them accountable for their actions.

Here is an amazing message that will be repeated throughout the history revealed to us in the stories of Scripture. Joseph, like his uncle Esau before him, and as Jesus will also emulate for us as **the** way of the humble servant of God, simply and without the slightest regret, sets aside his obvious power over others, in order to love them despite their faults and failings. Joseph could have done virtually anything he wanted to his relatively powerless brothers, but he chooses not to misuse his own powerful situation. In *Leave It To Beaver* the motivation to act in this way would be a strong sense of rightness without a defined source. In Christianity, the source is always God, the example of what to do is always Jesus, and the desire and will to do it flows from the power of the Holy Spirit.

In three-fold or as I like to view it, Trinitarian form, this is how Joseph presents his reason for revealing his identity: “for God sent me before you to preserve life.... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God....” Here is the fulfillment of Joseph’s dream that this cocky young teenager shared so long ago with his brothers – that they would bow down to him and he would have dominion over them. Who could have foreseen how the general theme of that dream would actually be fulfilled? Only God. Over the years of Joseph’s enslavement, he too has come to realize his own humble role in God’s plans for the nation of Israel. God is the life-giver, the preserver of life, and the One who renews each of us throughout our lives. God’s sovereign will is and always will be done with, or despite, our human actions or inaction. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann puts it like this, “Neither the freedom of the creature nor the gracious sovereignty of God is canceled. They are not in conflict, nor are they to be equated. God’s will makes use of all human action but is domesticated or limited by no human choice.”

If society, as reflected in the fictitious lives of the Cleaver family, as just one example, can only reach as far as the Golden Rule, then the world is in a whole lot of trouble. As we have already seen, the Golden Rule has a major flaw in that it does not acknowledge God as Creator and Lord of all. Socio-cultural reflections found in television, movies and other media are a part of most of our lives. It is up to each of us to keep that influence in perspective, because there is a much more significant relationship in my life and yours. It is our relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. As Joseph, his brothers, and their father Jacob have shown us, there is no situation where God is not present and constantly working for the sake of goodness and life in the face of sin, evil and death. In our humanity, we are often challenged to accept that God’s timing is perfect, not mine and not yours. God has sent me here. God has sent you here. Let us work together and with God to grow God’s kingdom of life and justice, of goodness and grace.

Amen.