

Last week we took a break from our series on virtue when Bishop Frank Lyons visited Apostles. Today we resume our series *Virtue Renews the World*, devoting our attention to the virtue of goodness or kindness, especially in the story of Joseph and his brothers. Before we embark on that story, I want to revisit why we've devoted eight weeks to meditate on virtue this autumn.

We're meditating on virtues to become prayerful missionaries in our city. God calls us to take on the character of Christ, not for our formation alone, but to become shining lights in dark places. We're meditating on virtues because we live in a time when the *words and convictions of Christians* are treated with suspicion and even contempt in the public square. I have no interest in complaining about the conditions of our secular age. I do not find it useful to fight a cultural war of words. There's no evidence that people are coming to Jesus because of lengthy Facebook threads or witty, snarky tweets on politics and religion. /

When words don't penetrate the hearts of unbelievers as in former years, we still bear witness of the Gospel. We still embrace the call of evangelism. We preach the Gospel wherever we go, as St. Francis said, and when necessary use words. /

We received some much needed rain this past week. I haven't needed to mow my yard for almost two weeks. We haven't had a drought as such, but an extended dry spell. On the whole, with some bright and noble exceptions, our culture has experienced an extended dry spell of human goodness. Yet Jesus said that the one who dwells in him becomes a spring of living water. Water moves from the depths of the earth to soak the ground, bringing forth life and fruit.

In recent times, there have been calls for random acts of kindness in our days. A good word to be sure. But the Gospel requires much more than a random or occasional act of kindness. We are called to a lifelong practice of goodness. What is the essence of goodness? To care for the life of another, to give love, to provide basic needs, to forgive. And that is what we see in the life of Joseph, and to his story we now turn.

Please return to page [] in your pew Bible. A brief aside: Joseph is my favorite biblical character, yet I've never preached a sermon on his life. And the story of Joseph occupies more space in Genesis than any of his fathers before him, Abraham included.

As much as I love these moving scenes of reconciliation and restoration with his brothers, I don't think I've grasped the richness of this story. Joseph is not a young man when his brothers come seeking his mercy. This is the penultimate scene of Joseph's life. After this exchange with his brothers, his only remaining words will be parting words from his deathbed.

I haven't considered the scars, both visible and invisible, that Joseph bears as an aging man. And yet he offers goodness and kindness despite those scars. It's one thing to offer kindness from your heart when you don't have history with someone. It's quite another to show goodness when you've suffered for many years.

So now imagine Joseph, not as an aging man, but as a young man. He's the runt. He has the favor of God upon. A multi-colored robe over his shoulders conveys his father's favor. Not just favor—Joseph is Jacob's favorite. When he's a young man Joseph also has dreams. His dreams come from the Lord, but they will be more burden than gift. /

I heard Thomas Hopko say that dreams aren't always the source of blessing. Our Ancient Enemy can attack us in our dreams. Or the Lord speaks through dreams and he wants to convict us of our sin, lead us to embrace a cross He sets before us.

As a young man, Joseph dreams his brothers will bow before him. Joseph lives in a culture where the first will be last, but God's dream means that Joseph, the runt—the least of his brothers—will be first. And this dream will lead Joseph into slavery.

With Jacob's favoritism so visible over Joseph, his brothers say, "Enough. We're throwing the dreamer in the pit. Nobody tell dad." And into a waterless pit the brothers cast Joseph. Not only was he thrown into a pit from which he couldn't escape. There was no relief, no goodness there—not even water.

While Joseph lies helpless in the pit, his brothers put him on the slave market. First he's sold to the Ishmaelites and then he's sold again to an Egyptian named Potiphar, a captain in Pharaoh's guard. With Joseph in Egypt, his brothers construct an elaborate lie to their father, Jacob, telling him that Joseph died. Here endeth the *beginning of Joseph's life*. //

Whatever terrible, embarrassing, dysfunctional, and painful moments you may have endured with your family, it's tough to keep pace with the evil in Joseph's family. Yet hope remains in this story. Hope persists even in stories with the most terrible beginnings.

You could say that Joseph suffered greatly because Jacob didn't love his sons equally. But there's more to it. *Everyone* loved Joseph. It seems he had some charisma about him, but that's not why Joseph found favor *beyond* his family. Joseph flourishes in Egypt for one reason: the Lord was with Joseph. And Joseph walked with the Lord. Relationship—not charisma—was the source of Joseph's favor and goodness.

When Joseph comes into Potiphar's household, Potiphar finds a young man who has more ability than the average slave. Joseph can manage a household. So Potiphar appoints Joseph overseer of his household. He trusts Joseph with everything he owned. As long as Joseph was in Potiphar's house, the Lord showed goodness upon all that Potiphar owned.

But Joseph would not remain in Potiphar's house for many years. Joseph wasn't only attractive because of his goodness, he was a handsome lad. And the wife of Potiphar had her eyes on Joseph and she had no qualms with adultery. On two occasions Potiphar seeks to seduce Joseph, but he refuses to dishonor Potiphar and even more, the Lord. Joseph says to Potiphar's wife, 'How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?'

We want to see the young man rewarded for his virtue. He has already suffered so much. It's so rare that young men resist temptation of this kind. But when Joseph's goodness increases, evil seeks to throw him down further. Thus did Potiphar's wife construct an elaborate lie to her husband about Joseph. Despite all the goodness that Joseph brought to Potiphar's

house, he ends up in the dungeon—the king’s prison.

My brother and sister, the virtue of goodness does not mean we will escape evil. Our acts of goodness do not mean we have a hedge of protection from injustice or suffering. Our goodness cannot be contingent upon the gratitude of those who benefit from our kindness. Like Joseph, we choose the path of goodness because God is good. Our goodness is for his glory, not for our comfort. /

Oh, it’s a tough path, but that’s how the story goes. Joseph goes into the dungeon and it’s absolutely unjust. And then you read Genesis 39:21: “But the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love and gave him favor in the sight of the keeper of the prison.” The keeper of the prison places Joseph in charge of all the other prisoners. It’s one of the most important sequences of Joseph’s story. *Joseph chooses goodness even in the darkness.*

I want the faith of Joseph, but my goodness, that is goodness beyond my character. I complain too much in discomfort. I would sulk a mighty long time if that many years of hardship piled up. Not Joseph. He chose goodness in the darkness, with no guarantee that he would ever leave the king’s prison.

But he *does* depart the king’s prison. When Pharaoh’s officers can’t interpret three dreams, Joseph makes sense of the mystery. And that gets him an audience with Pharaoh. Pharaoh ain’t sleeping well. He’s haunted by strange visions of overweight *and* emaciated cows; fruitful *and* scorched grain. No one in Pharaoh’s court has a clue about this dream—except Joseph.

Joseph essentially says to Pharaoh, “I have good news and bad news. Good news first: some good years are coming. Bad news: there’s a famine after the good years. The famine will be worse than the good years of harvest. So pick wise people who can oversee Egypt and store up food in the cities so they don’t die from famine.”

Joseph tells the truth. He's not seeking a promotion in Pharaoh's court when he interprets the dream. But Pharaoh knows a good man when he sees one. Pharaoh appoints Joseph to manage his household. In Egypt, only Pharaoh ranked higher than Joseph. /

That's a lot of life happening before the age of 30. That's right—all these events transpired in the first 30 years of Joseph's life. / I happen to believe that the 20s are the most difficult years in the first half of a person's life. Perhaps Joseph should be the patron patriarch for 20-somethings wrestling through life's joys and sorrows. For Joseph's early life is not only a witness of goodness in one moment, or even in favorable moments. Joseph was a man of *persistent goodness*, in season and out of season.

Not only was Joseph a man of *persistent goodness*, he was a man of *creative goodness*. I like that phrase from Bishop Todd Hunter—creative goodness. Goodness isn't just a duty because God is good, it's an opportunity for creativity because God is a creating God. We give thought and care about good actions—the cards we write, the events we host, the meals we prepare, the work we do. Bishop Hunter says that, "Witnessing a God-inspired, consistent life of creative goodness is the new apologetic." In other words, how we explain the truth of our faith. /

With a famine on the horizon, Joseph is a man of creative goodness. He stored up grain in abundance 'like the sand of the sea,' says Genesis. When famine swept across the nations of the Near East, there was bread in Egypt. When Egypt cried out for bread, Pharaoh said, 'Go to Joseph.' Becoming a person of creative goodness also means becoming a person of *proactive goodness*. You anticipate the needs of another before they ask. /

Now here is certainly a place where the Lord Jesus needs to baptize Southern culture. If you ask someone, 'can I do anything to help?' it's uncommon that we'll say, 'Actually, yeah.' Maybe there is nothing we can do to help a problem. But in the South, we also have this custom of never troubling anyone. Also the keeping up of appearances. 'I don't want to be a bother.'

When I think about how I can grow as a person of creative goodness, I want to be more proactive. You don't need permission to practice goodness. If you make a meal for a neighbor, they can always refuse the meal. Don't take it personal, just go to the next house or freeze it. Move towards the basic needs of every person made in the image of God. Everyone needs food, everyone needs comfort, everyone needs laughter in hard times, everyone needs conversation, even the introverts—just not as much. Think of people around you who are struggling. What can you do to lessen their burdens? Anticipate their needs and show up in goodness.

Through all his trials and triumphs, his rising and falling, his honor and dishonor; the wound of his brothers' evil remains. Joseph has lived a life of goodness—not a perfect life—but a life of *persistent, creative goodness*. But the most important act of goodness in Joseph's life comes at the end of his days.

When famine sweeps through Canaan, his brothers come to Egypt seeking food. When his brothers encounter Joseph, they don't recognize him. Yet the brother they cast into an empty pit fills their bags full of food. When the time comes for Joseph to reveal his identity to his brother, somehow he says to them, "it was not you who sent me here, but God." Joseph forgives his brothers, brings them to Egypt, provides for their every need, and Jacob reunites with his favored son just before his death.

And yet. Joseph's brothers *still* fear punishment for their evil actions in the past. / Grace sometimes is simply unbelievable. We don't believe the word of grace when it's spoken over us. We need reassurance. / And it's reassurance that Joseph gives to his brother and so much more. He gives them God. "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, *to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today.*" The truly good saint sees that personal hardships have a greater purpose. In the mystery of God, many people were saved from famine because of Joseph's suffering *and* his goodness.

And then Joseph says a second time, 'Do not fear; I will provide for you

and your little ones.' / Sometimes you have to keep *saying* 'do not fear.' Sometimes you have to keep *hearing* 'do not fear' until it sinks in, until your heart really believes it's true.

At the end of Joseph's life, we see that he prepares a future for *all* Israel. Jacob's sons—the twelve tribes of Israel—don't die in their treachery. Joseph's creative goodness ensures life for the *whole nation*.

Even when there's one good man left in Israel; even when he's left for dead; even when he's sold in slavery; even when he's living in exile; goodness and kindness create a future that seemed impossible. This is our story: goodness renews the world, because God who created this world is good. And his Name is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.