

### *Ressentiment/Consentement*

Texts: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; St. Matthew 14:22-33

It was, I suppose, inevitable. If you were a Hindu, or the title character of the TV show, “My Name is Earl” you might call it karma. If you were a sociologist, it would be evidence that dysfunctional family characteristics are passed on to later generations. The rest of us might just call it poetic justice. But whatever the cause, Jacob got what was coming to him. Jacob had not treated his brother Esau well, and had caused his father, Isaac, no small amount of grief and anxiety because of that; when he had his own family Jacob had grief of his own.

Oh, the first nine boys were alright by themselves, although you probably wouldn’t want to mess with them. The youngest Benjamin who stayed at home was no problem. But it was number ten, Joseph who was the problem. After all, a much younger son does not easily get away with having dreams that he then interprets as signifying that his older brothers will bow down and serve him. He especially doesn’t get away with it when he is audacious enough to tell the older brothers about it. Jacob himself did not help matters, either, for he played favorites with his sons. Genesis tells us that Jacob, “loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age.” He gave Joseph wonderful presents such as a coat of many colors that he didn’t give the older boys . Clearly, Jacob’s parenting skills left something to be desired. It is no surprise, then, to learn that all Joseph’s brothers “hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.” It is small wonder that they even went to the extreme of throwing him in a well, selling him to some passing camel traders and faking his death to their father, whose inconsolable grief just sort of proved their point once again.

Now, the problem Jacob’s sons had with respect to Joseph is precisely what you would assume it to be, namely, resentment. Resentment is that deep and abiding state of mind that is

more than an unsettling emotion. It is caused by the perception of injustice, especially the sense that somebody else has gotten something that we think should be coming to us. Resentment when it goes deep becomes a way of reading the world and is something that we carry within ourselves. Deep resentment sees injustices done to us *everywhere*. Resentment can be caused by jealousy and envy and it certainly breeds them. Given an opening, it frequently flares up in anger and hard words. But since it also comes about in situations that are both unjust and that we can't really do much about, it also hides itself like a snake when it does not find easy and obvious avenues for expression. For example, Jacob's boys might have believed themselves to be treated unjustly because of the favoritism shown to Joseph, but even though they were bigger, they couldn't show their resentment openly because of Jacob, their father. Thus resentment simmers beneath the surface, and, like bacteria in a warm petrie dish, grows. It is also like a sore that itches and that we keep picking at, making it bleed and get worse. It, unchecked, can come to color everything we do. And it also waits, looking for some opportunity or means to avenge whatever injustices, real or imagined, have been done to us.

Resentment is something that can easily arise in small groups such as families as it did in Jacob's family. But it can also take place in much larger social contexts as well. In the workplace we easily resent others who are promoted and valued above us if we see ourselves as their equals or betters. We resent, too, those whom we think are responsible for the injustice. We can plot revenge and in idle moments play out delicious scenarios in which everybody gets his come-uppance, although we rarely are in a position powerful enough to carry those scenarios out. Resentment can even come into play at the highest social levels. It was cited, for example, as a reason why the United States was attacked nearly seven years ago, that is, it was claimed that the Muslim world resented our life style. White resentment surely is being appealed to whenever

whites say that blacks are “playing the race card” or that we need to strike down policies meant to ensure better racial representation in colleges and graduate schools. In both cases, whites think somebody is trying to get something unfairly. Indeed, a survey published this weekend in *The New York Times* indicates that forty-eight percent of *white* folk rather incredibly think that they have been discriminated against. Resentment is also surely alive in the black community when it contemplates centuries of injustice, and promises of present equal opportunity that it often finds to be empty. When such resentment in either case is appealed to, a covert appeal is also being made to do something about it, for there is surely strength in numbers, even if we can’t do anything about it alone.

Resentment can get so big that it has even been cited as being a *primary* political and social motivational source in cultures as a whole. In the opening book of Plato’s *Republic*, for example, when Socrates tries to figure out what justice is, the badly mannered Thrasymachus jumps in to claim that real justice would be the strong getting their way anytime, anyway. What is *called* justice, he claims, which is to say the rules and laws of political society, is just the weak ganging up and pressing their advantage over the strong. So, he thinks, what is *called* justice is really unjust. It is the result of the fear and resentment of the crowd. Socrates is able to make short logical work of Thrasymachus, but as we all know, bad ideas don’t die at the hands of reason, at least not very easily. Thrasymachus’ views in a much stronger form came back in the nineteenth century when the German philosopher, Friederich Nietzsche, claimed that conventional morality, a morality which he traced back to Socrates, and saw exemplified in Christianity, was born of resentment – or, using the French as he did, *ressentiment*. It was a slave morality of the herd.. It forced people into self denial, and it made them afraid and subservient. While such conventional morality looked good, it had a deep resentment of real life at its root,

resentment because it didn't have the strength or spirit to really live. It was particularly odious, he thought, because it always sucked all the joy out of life. Thus Nietzsche argued, it had to be set aside and the strong needed to be called upon to live out their strong desires, and to express themselves and not to worry about others or even what is called good and evil. Nietzsche, of course, saw himself as one of these supermen who needed to express and celebrate himself. A recent biographer has observed that he wrote no less than nine autobiographies.

There is something frankly nauseating about Nietzsche. When writing about *ressentiment*, Nietzsche surely knew what he was talking about, given the amount of resentment he himself showed towards others who failed to appreciate him properly. Yet, even so, the old boy actually had a point, and a pretty good one when one looks closely at the Victorian society in which he lived. Freud knew it, too. That society was repressive in all sorts of ways. There was a lot of duty, there was a lot of social pressure, and there wasn't much joy. It was as if a veil of thick muslin had been drawn over real life that kept us from ever seeing it clearly and grasping it firmly.

That was then, but the same can be argued now. In some places, religious life can sometimes be life denying, not life affirming. In such places, people are asked to convert from fear of God's wrath, which is to be sure fearful, but are not asked to choose God from joy or into love. Similarly, morality can be a matter of scaring people and making them conform. Clearly a lot of our legal proceedings insofar as they involve suing others, come from resentment. Our competitiveness is often born of resentment, too. Competition can be playing a game for the joy of the game. It can also be driven by resentment of the success of others. The amount of cheating that takes place from Little League to the Tour de France is proof of it. Or, consider this example: I once had a colleague some years ago with whom I frequently played racquetball. I usually had

the best of him, at least for most of any game as I had ten years on him. But he couldn't stand losing, and would do just about anything to win –or, more precisely would do anything to not lose. He sort of went berserk when he was about to lose. He carried this attitude forwards elsewhere. If he felt another scholar was getting more attention than he was, he tended to look up bad reviews of their work and circulate them. He was, I am afraid, in a way symbolic of a lot of competition that we see. This ranges from high school's competition to get into a premier college to professional races to win prizes in scientific fields, or to personal competition between lawyers in court rooms. In such cases fun, life, wisdom, knowledge, truth and justice can easily go by the boards, and are replaced by self-seeking competition, self-celebration and self interest, and cheap pragmatism.

Now what is the answer to *ressentiment*? Nietzsche thought it was throwing off conventional morality, and celebrating the strong self. There are clearly a lot of people who have tried this solution, although I am not at all sure how much joy they have embraced, and how much they have really touched life. A lot of them are just jerks as far as I can tell. But there is another way. We don't in English have exactly the right word, but in French, the opposite to *ressentiment* is *consentement* – consentment, as it were. This at least is a term that the French philosopher Simone Weil used. Weil probably would have agreed with Nietzsche on several fronts with respect to the degree of *ressentiment* that motivates modern folk. But the answer to that was not to celebrate the self, she thought. If anything caused resentment and a veil to be drawn over the joy of life, it was usually the self or the ego. For example, it is usually the wounded ego that causes us to resent others, and to feel that we are treated unfairly. Surely this was the case with Joseph's brothers, even if he was a brat. The solution to resentment then is not to give more regard to the self, but to look less at oneself and to look at other things as they are

and to welcome them. That sort of selflessness, and not the oppressive type that breeds dullness and resentment, is a path to joy.

Let me just give one brief example of what this might involve. In our Gospel lesson this morning, Jesus comes walking on the water. Peter is mightily impressed after he is convinced that this isn't a ghost, and asks Jesus to bid him come to him on the water. Now, Peter was actually able to take a couple of steps, but soon noticing the strong wind he began to get frightened and thus started panicking – and sinking. Jesus subsequently criticizes him as being of little faith, and for doubting, clearly indicating that this lack of faith was the source of his failure.

But what does this mean? What does faith mean in a context like this? I think most Americans take it to mean something like the power of positive thinking. If you just believe strongly enough, you will be able to pull it off. Football coaches and motivational teachers tell us this sort of thing all the time. So, too, do cheap evangelists such as Joel Osteen. I really doubt this version of faith, though. Years ago at our family's lake cabin I remember trying to believe enough to walk on water; somehow no matter how hard I tried I kept sinking. After a lot of years I realize that my faith and ability to believe was not the problem, and I also realize that talk as much as he may about just believing enough, Joel Osteen himself can't walk on water, either. Neither could Vince Lombardi, no matter what the folks in Green Bay say. Faith in this context has to mean something else.

Let me give you a guess as to what that something else might be. Often when we take faith in the motivational speaker/football coach/Joel Osteen mode what we are taking it to be is some kind of leverage against others. Thus, for example, in this mode we may imagine that faith gives us an advantage over the other side that doesn't believe as much as we do. Why? Because they are morally weaker than we are. Faith in this case is not a grasping of the life of another, it is

a weapon against them. In the same way, it can also be, if you try to walk on water, a way of getting a leg up on water, as it were. But why should faith be something that gives us an advantage over others, including the forces of nature? Why shouldn't faith be a sort of justice that puts us as equals of others and lets us appreciate them for what they are? Why should faith let us beat them? If that is what faith does, it is a tool of resentment. No, faith has to be something else. In this case, then, why shouldn't faith be what lets us see things as they are, and let us treat them as objects of God's love too, and thus as deserving of our love and respect and justice, even if they don't always give us what we want? If this is what faith really is, then maybe it creates miracles because it lets other things act in the fullness of their being. Thus, for example, in the case of this Gospel story, I want to guess, and I want to propose that the reason that Jesus walked on the water, is not because he lorded it over the water, not because he commanded it to let him pass over. I am guessing he got to walk on the water because he asked the permission of the water and the water was so delighted to be taken seriously that it let him pass over.

Well, that is probably a very fanciful way of looking at this story, and I freely admit that there is absolutely no textual evidence for it. What evidence there is for it simply comes from the fact that Christ treats us in this way. Although he is our creator and lord and master, he asks our permission to enter our hearts. As St. Gregory of Nazianzus wrote in the fourth century: "This is how God does things. For his custom is to persuade, not to manhandle mortal men." Similarly, there are some stories of St. Francis and his love for all creatures great and small that lend credence to reading the story this way. But fanciful or not, what I am convinced of is that resentment is cured by consenting to the existence of others, often the weird, frightening, annoying, boring and irritating existence of others, and just plain delighting in it, even though it may not do you a lot of good. I am even quite positive that the world of nature, which we in the

modern world think is lifeless and there for the plundering, will whisper to us its secrets if we ask it, instead of grabbing it by the throat and forcing it. And what I am also convinced of is that faith gives us a world of joy and adventure, and that it overcomes resentment, because it welcomes God's world and looks for God's light instead of fighting against it, instead of thinking that we are owed us something that it unjustly has failed to give.

If I am sure of these things, it is because faith can provide evidence for them. It provides personal experience that these things are true. Thus on this morning I simply bid you to go out and open your eyes, and ask the world to reveal itself to you. Ask another person to reveal herself to you. And if you do, I dare say you will be surprised how much bitterness and resentment disappear. You will be surprised at how much life and joy there is in creation, even when it doesn't always work to our advantage. You will be surprised how much you have fallen in love and out of resentment.