

Rev. Lacey Hunter
Community Church of Sebastopol
August 16, 2020
Text: Genesis 45:1-15
Theme: Stewarding Antiracism

What a beautiful story today's scripture offers us – a story of surprising, overwhelming reconciliation between family members. After being betrayed, beaten and sold into slavery by his brothers, Joseph manages to turn his enslavement into a blessing. Years later, when his brothers come before him in need, Joseph is so overjoyed to see his brothers, he weeps over them and reveals himself to them with words of deep gratitude. He weeps so loudly that the house of Pharaoh hears it and is later compelled to give Joseph's family land and resources. What a wonderful story of reconciliation and new life. Even the Psalm that is paired in the lectionary with today's scripture sounds like a celebration of this story. Psalm 133 begins, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!" Despite all the harm Joseph endured at the beginning of his life, how good and pleasant things end up. From Sunday school on, this is most often the story we hear of Joseph. It's a beautiful story of the desire for unity triumphing over violence and hate.

Yet, the more I sit with the story of Joseph and his kindred reconciliation, this vision of family unity despite a difficult past, the more it starts to unravel. This story of "good and pleasant unity" is in actuality, the story as told by the Israelites, the descendants of Joseph's brothers, the descendants of the very people who sold him into slavery. How does the story change for us then, when acknowledged as the fantasy of enslavers?

Joseph's brothers are threatened by his difference so they sell him into slavery.

Eventually they are reunited and not once do they apologize and acknowledge and take responsibility for their violent actions or say what has changed in them.

Instead, we are told about the meaning Joseph has made of his suffering, the positive things his enslavement has allowed for, and Joseph rewards his brothers with restored relationship and resources. It's a reconciliation that requires nothing of his brothers. It's a fantasy of unity, a fantasy that teaches us that you can buy and sell people and expect gratitude, joy and love. I don't believe that there is anything good or pleasant about this unity. For this unity to become a story truly about just relationships, we have to transform it and all stories like it, into stories of real accountability. If we do not, what's to say that the next Dreamer these brothers and the world encounters won't be locked up and sold as well?

As we continue with the worship theme, "Stewarding Antiracism," I am reminded that this story of Joseph and his brothers is not unlike the story of slavery that we have been told and tell in this country for decades. Despite 400 years of slavery, from chattel slavery to the prison industrial complex, a persistent narrative is that the violence and oppression of racism can be overcome if we desire and strive for unity.

Desires for unity come in many forms. Unity in the form of colorblindness, that if we don't acknowledge difference we won't treat people differently. Unity in the form of the American Dream, that if we all work towards the same success, everyone will be successful. As a Christian minister I find myself often pulled towards a desire for unity in the form of, "If we all just come

to the table, there will be no more violence.” And then, with each of these desires for unity, I am confronted with the reality of the inequitable, unjust hierarchy of our society.

Is it really just and equitable unity if ignoring difference means we cannot understand, delight in and empathize with difference, especially when structures treat people unjustly according to difference?

Is it really just and equitable unity when one size success does not fit all or account for our different ways of flourishing?

Is it really just and equitable unity if only some people at the table understand the language being spoken?

Is it really just and equitable unity if someone makes the decisions before the table is even set?

Is it really just and equitable unity if not everyone’s voice at the table has equal access to resources, structural power, decision-making?

Like the story of Joseph and his brother, the more I sit with the story of racism and unity, the more it starts to unravel, and “unity” begins to sound a lot like the fantasy of enslavers, colonizers, Whiteness, racism. How and when do our desires for unity hold us back from taking individual and collective responsibility for racist ideas, so that we can be accountable to acting in antiracist ways?

I want to take a moment to acknowledge that even as I say this, I feel some shame rising in my body. I can feel my chest tightening and my face getting flushed. I don’t want some of my deepest desires to lead to any kind of racist action. There is a part of me that wants to defend myself. My longing for everyone to come to the table, for unity, for love, these are some of my deepest longings, how could those be harmful in any way? If I was watching this video, I might even want to look away, or click to the next video, or leave the room. I acknowledge all of that discomfort in myself. If there is any shame, guilt, discomfort, defensiveness rising up in you, I invite you to feel that and to stay, to lean into those feelings and keep struggling. Because I believe these stories and this moment in our world are inviting us into the blessing of truly being accountable to one another in ways that will allow us to transform the world together. It might be painful work, but it is also beautiful and, I believe, kin-dom making work.

Mia Mingus, a disability and transformative justice educator and community organizer reminds us that “true accountability is changing your behavior so that the harm, violence, abuse does not happen again.”¹ This kind of accountability is what Ibram X. Kendi, author of, “How to Be an Antiracist,” is speaking to when he says that to become antiracist, we must change our actions and policies – written and unwritten – so that they promote greater equity for all. To be accountable to one another we must consistently examine ourselves – individually and collectively – asking the question, “Do my/our actions promote greater equity for all?” When we

¹ Mia Mingus' on “The Four Parts of Accountability” <https://leavingevidence.wordpress.com/2019/12/18/how-to-give-a-good-apology-part-1-the-four-parts-of-accountability/>

Also, Layli Long Soldier on "The Freedom of Real Apologies" <https://onbeing.org/programs/layli-long-soldier-the-freedom-of-real-apologies-oct2018/>

discover that our actions do not promote greater equity, accountability means changing our actions. I'll share two stories to help us explore this idea of accountability more.

For the past year I have been serving as the Team Lead for Justice and Witness Ministries in our Northern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ. The main task that I was given was to facilitate a team who would craft a resolution calling on our UCC Conference to "Become Antiracist." It's an important commitment, much like our Conference and our congregation's commitment to be "Open and Affirming." In order to assemble this team I reached out to Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander colleagues throughout the conference. My thought was that if our conference was going to say we are becoming antiracist, then the needs and dreams of what it means to be antiracist should come from the voices of People of Color. The responses that I got back from many people was, It's important our churches and conference do the work of antiracism, but we're tired of resolutions that make sweeping pronouncements with no action. It won't help people and communities of color, and it may even lead to greater harm, if we continue to make grand declarations of unity with no real accountability and action.

So we changed because that's what it meant to transform our desire for unity into accountability to one another and the truth that was being offered. Rather than imagining one declarative resolution that would likely make some of us feel good without actually changing the ways White Supremacy pervades our churches, we set out to craft multiple resolutions that were grounded in action and would change policies. If passed:

- * One resolution will require all authorized ministers and ministers in training to engage in 6 hours of antiracist/racial justice trainings every 3 years, and 1 hour of training in intervening years.

- * One resolution invites congregations to engage in and track their yearly antiracist/racial justice formation and accountability.

- * One resolution proposes ways to expand access to our Outdoor Ministries, such as Camp programs, where communities of color have largely been absent for decades.

- * And one resolution proposes ways to begin making amends with indigenous communities from whom our churches stole land to worship on. I am delighted to share that two Community Church members, Judy Hawkins and Sharon Fennema, helped craft this resolution.

These resolutions are living documents, something we will have to collectively return to again and again to experiment with and adapt, because that is what it means to be accountable to one another.

I'll share one other example with you, the story of a congregation whose faith statement is that they are a church "Where Love is First,"² and the ways they are growing in accountability to that statement. First Congregational Church of Oakland (First Congo) is located in downtown Oakland, at the intersection of several main streets. The building looms large over the area. Several years ago, after the police killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, many communities felt compelled to put up public signs declaring, "Black Lives Matter." First Congo

²First Congregational Church of Oakland's commitment entitled, "Seeking & Living into *Love is First* in a time of white supremacy & Christian hegemony"

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1pGvf9AhE1BTvtheJR4eHEpwwaz87HqNB0KnWUHR64LE/edit>

was moved to do likewise and their building was an ideal space for this kind of public statement. But they didn't just go out and buy a banner to hang up on the outside of their sanctuary. Rather, they began a congregation-wide conversation about what it means to live by and be accountable to the statement, "Black Lives Matter," and they discerned what would need to change in their community so that they could truly say, "Black Lives Matter here." One of the steps of accountability that those conversations led them to was to become a community empowered to not call the cops. This meant they had to develop and imagine new understandings and structures of care, safety, and communal responsibility. They now help other faith communities build capacity for collective care, de-escalation and community response. First Congo's desire to proclaim "Black Lives Matter" led them to listen to what Black people in the community were asking for, as well as what the Movement for Black Lives was and continues to invite, and First Congo was open to being changed in order to support those asks. This is what it looks like to transform a desire for unity into accountable action.

Like these stories of antiracist accountability, what might it look like if the story of Joseph was not a fantasy of unity but a story of real, growing accountability? What if Joseph's brothers, at meeting him again, were not silenced by their shame but surrounded him with apologies, taking responsibility for their actions and the harm they caused? What if they wrapped him in his coat of many colors as a first step towards honoring all that he has survived and the power of his dreams? What if his brother's sat down at table with him and listened, truly listened to Joseph's dreams and what if they allowed Joseph's dreams to change them? What if they collaborated with Joseph, giving their resources, their land, their time and energy to the flourishing of these dreams? What if that is the story of real accountability we prayed with? I believe it is the real accountability the world is inviting us into now, as we heed the call to co-create an antiracist kingdom for all. May it be so. Amen.