

Sermon Text for Sunday September 11, 2016

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Luke 6:43-49, Genesis 44:14-18, 30-34

“The final exam”

I have often said that how a man or a woman reacts to stress in their life reveals how deep their moral character is, but even more importantly what their relationship to God is like. I have heard of people describe their spouses as a possessed being when things at work are not going well or there are stressful situations at the home. We have a term in Scripture that we use to describe these times in our lives and that is testing. We are being tested. Have you ever felt that way? Of course you have, we have all felt that way at times.

A very wise person once told me that sin is not so much an action that you take which might be reprehensible, but rather how do you deal with your mistakes, how do you handle events in your life when things do not seem to be going well and you are sure that somebody has it in for you. Do we give up, or pout, blame others, run away from the problem and hope to never face it again? How we deal with life situations will reflect upon who we are. Do you believe that?

Well, we see it reflected very clearly in our reading from Genesis this morning. Joseph’s brothers face their final exam today. This is the very last scene we have before Joseph reveals to them who he is, and before he does that he wants to make sure that they have truly changed. From this we ask ourselves how are we rooted, are we firmly planted in the love and security of Christ. If we are then we can confidently do and say the right thing knowing that Christ will respect the action we take in faith, otherwise we will always be cramming and unsure of our position before God.

I had a tradition in college that the night before a big exam I would go see a movie, or go for a walk, basically I would go do something that would take my mind off of the exam the next day. I knew that I had studied as much as I could and that there was nothing more I could do. Maybe there was a certain confidence because I had been to the classes, I did the assignments, and now all that was left was the exam.

Needless to say many of us don’t always feel that confident before exams, or interviews, or anything that tests our abilities or reveals what we know or who we are. Some people in fact work better under pressure. But others are always cramming and worried up to the last minute. Often times we live our lives as an experience of worrying

about one thing after another. We will find today that Christ allows us to take off a burden of worry and put on a mantle of confidence not because of who we are or our gifts and talents but because of who he is in our life.

Let's look at Genesis and see this final exam, truly this is the last test before Joseph reveals to them who he is. All of the brothers have just finished a major feast where it is now time for them to go. Joseph talks to his servant and tells him to purposefully put his best chalice in the bag of Benjamin, the little brother, without anyone knowing.

As the brothers have already headed home Joseph sends out the troops and they discover the chalice in Benjamin's stuff and he is of course accused of stealing. A little cultural understanding on this chalice that Joseph mentions he uses for divination. There was a practice by rulers of having a favorite chalice that they would use they thought to tell the future. They would pour oil or water in it, almost like reading tea leaves, and they said that they could tell omens, when to strike in battle, when to stay home, so this chalice was very important and could have dictated the fate of the empire as far as the brothers were concerned.

The brothers now face a dilemma, they could let Benjamin go back by himself to Joseph and they could continue on their merry way. They choose to all go back and appeal to Joseph. We know that Joseph has set the whole thing up because he wants to see what the brothers are going to do. The brothers are struggling for survival, but not Joseph, he is merely testing them to see if they are morally regenerated or not. When the brothers enter Joseph's house they do the same thing that they did last time they saw Joseph in his house. They fall to the ground, remember the dream. Judah now becomes the leader and offers no excuses, makes no deals, basically states you have caught us, we are yours. Joseph says, don't worry about it, Benjamin is really the only one who is guilty. Then Judah offers the most moving speech in all of the Old Testament as we pick up the end where he offers his own life in exchange for his brother because he was responsible for the boy and he cannot bear to see his father's grief.

The test is now over, Judah and the rest of the brothers have taken the final exam and they give their answer which is one of selfless sacrifice, their lives in exchange for their little brother. The chapter ends here, next chapter we get to see the grade they get. Joseph had set up this whole scenario. Like a teacher he sets the stage as closely resembling the one in which they had earlier failed the test. Had they changed, or were

they the same? It is obvious that their interests no longer lay in their selfish ambitions but rather they were more concerned about Benjamin and their father. They were willing to give up their lives for another.

15 years ago I was in the parking lot of Putnam Community Medical Center, it was our local hospital in Florida, and we had our ministerial meeting. I was getting ready to go into the hospital for our meeting when on the radio on NPR the announcer was talking about a plane that had flown into one of the towers. I turned off the radio and walked into the hospital just in time to see the second plane fly into the tower. You see for me, it wasn't an event that was happening nearly 1,000 miles away from me. My brother Timmy who had battled schizophrenia his entire life had been placed in the towers on a cleaning crew. For the next 4 hours our family spent trying to get ahold of Timmy. He had called in sick that day and didn't answer our calls because he was feeling terrible. He had no idea what had happened. The worker who was sent to replace him died in the tower.

9-11 was not just an event in history for me, it was a personal event. I'll never forget the Sunday after that Tuesday, the church was packed, in the middle of my sermon as I preached about our gut desire for revenge 2 F-15s flew along the river right by the church. Mother's hugged their children and couples held hands. You remember those days, don't you? Our nation was put to the test. It wasn't so much how we reacted that day, as much as how would we react as a result of what happened to us, which was the most important.

We have become a nation that makes decisions based on fear, not on a confidence which we once had. We are nation that is turning on our own people, muslim americans, because we feel that they are not one of us, they are. Joseph's brothers passed the test that he gave them and they were willing to sacrifice their lives for little Benjamin. Our first responders were willing to do the same on that day. But as a nation, our desire for vengeance and a protectionist mentality that isolates ourselves and keeps those who are different from us away is a sign that we are failing that test.

Jesus in Luke talks about the testing that takes place in our lives as a storm that batters us. If we are firmly entrenched with a foundation in Christ then we will be able to make it through. You know the church is not a foundation, Club House is not a foundation, the praise team is not a foundation. You can attend and be an active member of all these things and even more but still have your foundation as sand because the only

firm foundation is Christ, the solid rock on which we stand, all other ground is sinking sand. I would challenge all of us this election season as the world continues to be rocked by terrorist threats and attacks, to think about what we say in light of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. If our stances and our policies and our words don't reflect Jesus, then why in the world would we want to be a part of that.

But it is harder to build upon the rock. It is hard to make it even and to make sure you are anchored down, you have to work at it. It is easier to build on sand, you just throw some concrete down and you're set, but when the storm comes, look out. It is harder to take a stand that is controversial. It is so much easier to say words that people will agree with and that attacks people who can't defend themselves or don't have the power to do so in our country. If we are going to be tested in life we had better work hard beforehand and not try to cram because the final exam could be a pop-quiz. Judah and his brothers didn't expect this questioning to happen, but their love was for God so they could answer honestly in the face of the storm.

This should remind us of a couple of things, Paul's words in Romans 5:7 where he reminds us of how difficult it is to find anyone who would die for us, while Christ died for us and in a similar way here Judah is willing to be taken into captivity for the sake of saving his family. Then again in John 15:13 where Jesus himself tells us that there is no greater love than to lay down our lives for those around us. This is how we should act in the final exam.

Yes we are called to be firmly grounded so that when tests come we can pass them because we are so firmly grounded upon Christ. Yet at the same time if we find ourselves in a situation where you don't have a choice but to build on the sand then it is time to move neighborhoods, change policy otherwise the house will fall and great will be its fall.

If how we act in times of stress such as Judah and the example of a storm in Luke reveals to the world what we are made of and upon whom we are grounded, then discover what it means to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ who allows you to lay all of your burdens on him so that he can relieve the stress you may have because you can know for a fact that he is handling all your life situations. Amen.