

During Great Britain’s colonial rule of India, Afghan rebels seized two English officers. Throughout their imprisonment together, the two men found great comfort and strength in a prayer book they had been allowed to keep. They managed to borrow a pen and write of their sometimes quite brutal experiences in the margins, along with how those experiences shaped their spiritual journeys. The final entry in the prayer-book-become-diary-become-religious-journal was made by a third individual. He wrote the two officers had been led out, forced to dig two graves—and never seen again.

Twenty years passed before a remarkable set of circumstances eventually led to that prayer book coming into the hands of one of the missing officer’s sisters. Reading the entries convinced her “revenge” was demanded. And the method settled upon? She carefully gathered all the money she could spare from her own needs, then forwarded it to a British hospital in India with these instructions for its use:

Please keep a bed free in your hospital at all times for a sick or wounded Afghan, and use the money to take care of him until he regains his health. I am doing this in the memory of my brother who suffered so much at the hands of the Afghans and who died in their country. That story is found in the book by Cornelia Lehn, titled, *Peace Be with You* (Faith and Life Press, Newton, Kansas, 1980, p. 68).

Amazon.com describes the book as “A collection of stories, from history and oral tradition, of persons whose lives exemplified Christian doctrines of peace, even when confronted with violent circumstances.” This particular story is the story of Captain Connelly and his sister. And I’m wondering if this is a troubling story for you?

It’s troubling to me on one level because of the precedent it may seem to set: do wrong, and get rewarded. It’s troubling on another level because of the deterrence it undermines: for if terrorism is met with forgiveness, what will keep the terrorists at bay? But perhaps most disturbing of all is this: if I had been in that woman’s place, what would have been my *revenge*? Would I have written the check to establish a hospital bed, or demanded suffering’s repayment in kind?

John Indermark suggests that we take the story of this woman and her “revenge” and place it alongside the remarkable narrative of Joseph’s reunion with his brothers in Genesis 45, bearing in mind this wise admonition from St. Augustine: “*Trust the past to the mercy of God, trust the present to the love of God, trust the future to the providence of God.*” For if I understand both stories, they illustrate the deep wisdom and spiritual power of Augustine’s words.

Trust the past to the mercy of God. I suspect each one of us knows of some individual trapped in a past made inescapable by the absence of mercy. Some wrong done to them that was never forgiven—some wrong they did for which they’ve never found absolution. And perhaps, if the truth be told, that description may hit closer to home than we care to admit—some dusty corner of life we still fear to drag out into the sunlight, reluctant to confess wounds that should have long ago healed—except for the fact we have secretly held on to them.

Surely the sister of the dead British officer had cause to look upon the past as an open sore in need of retribution. The same is true in the Joseph story. This morning’s Scripture reading picks up the story at its very climax, when his long-estranged brothers stand before Joseph. The same brothers who cast him into a pit to die of heat and thirst, the same brothers whose ensuing pang of conscience consisted of hauling

him out of the pit in order to sell their own flesh and blood into slavery. These same brothers now come begging for food from a brother they don't even think is alive until this very moment. It is a marvelous setup for Joseph to savor a moment of sweet revenge. Yet Joseph, like the officer's sister, chooses to trust the past to the mercy of God. And a past entrusted to God's mercy opens the present to God's love.

Trust the present to the love of God is what Augustine counsels believers to do. The love of God trusted in this present day is first of all the love God has given to us. To recognize one's life immersed in the love of God is one thing when family is close and friends are true, when our career is rising and health is un failing. It is quite another thing to affirm God's love in the midst of estrangement and loneliness, in crisis or weakness. For then, love requires faith. And faith must take risks.

Even then, there is more to trusting the present to the love of God than confessing we are God-loved people. As the first letter of John argues so eloquently, if we love God we will love one another—for how can we love a God who remains unseen when we do not love those whom we see all too clearly? Trusting the present to God's love means offering to others the very love we have received from God.

And it's hard to love others in this present moment when we have not yet let go of past resentments. That's an odd thing about the past and the present: if you don't get over the first, you never fully live into the next. Things that nag you from before, if you don't let go of them or find resolution, have a way of following you all the way through life. The present is kept from being the fresh possibility God intends because of the baggage weighing you down from yesterday. The bottom line is: you can't love those whom you want to get even with.

Again, look back to our two stories. By his willingness to forgive, Joseph stands ready to renew his love for his brothers. In verse 5 he even suggests a providential hand in their previous treachery toward him: *"And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."* The setting aside of the past and its resentments enables the healing of Joseph's long-estranged family. A similar act occurs with the officer's sister. She chooses mercy with which to lay the past to rest, and in doing so she brings the Christ's command to love even our enemy into life. Mercy applied to the past enables love expressed in the present: but it doesn't stop there.

Trust the future to the providence of God. Faith doesn't consist entirely of remembering the old, old story, nor is it entirely fulfilled when we put those words into practice with acts of love today. Faith leads us to consideration of the future, a future marked by the providential hand of God.

Joseph came to understand it had been God's providence for the future that had guided the twists and turns of his life all along. After Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were afraid their brother *"may hold a grudge against them...for all the wrongs they did to him"* (50:15). Apparently they had never let go of the past. So as they came before Joseph, this time they came begging for their lives—or, if you will, for their future. And how did Joseph respond, in that final chapter of Genesis? *"Don't be afraid. Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm to me, but God intended it for good."* Having known God's provision for his life through all his varied experiences, Joseph trusted the future to be a place where that provision would continue. It didn't need to be a place of vengeance.

And think of how the act of the officer's sister affected the future: not only her own, but the future of an enemy Afghan wounded and ill. They found sanctuary and healing from her hand, a hand that might

easily have paid for revenge against her brother's killers. That is why her action reveals an extraordinary faith in God's providence to take the future and transform it.

What's the explanation for this? Conventional wisdom wages war to *eliminate* one's enemy from the future. Diplomatic wisdom negotiates peace to *deter* one's enemy in the future. But God's wisdom counsels love of one's enemy to *change* the future.

In light of Joseph's example and the example of Captain Connelly's sister, the possibilities of our own future begins to emerge. We can affect what comes to pass in this world—and in fact, whether we realize it or not, we already do. Every time we maintain grudges and guilt we allow the past and its errors to remain unchallenged and unforgiven. When we lay to rest that which has been and no longer is, we create reconciliation and new beginnings so we can express the love we ourselves have received from God's gracious hand.

“Trust the past to the mercy of God. Trust the present to the love of God. Trust the future to the providence of God.” Christian friends: Practice these words of wisdom from Augustine, and if you do, both you and the world around you will be changed for the better! Amen.