

"OF ALL THE ROTTEN LUCK"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
September 7, 1997

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INTRODUCTION

A Florida jury squeezed into an elevator making its way to the courtroom when the elevator got stuck between floors. They were later told that it was an electrical problem, but for forty minutes this jury sweated in dark and cramped uncertainty. Can't you hear them "bad-mouthing" elevators? Really....rotten luck....and I don't mean for the jury of twelve in that hot elevator. Their inconvenience was brief. I mean it was rotten luck for the Otis Elevator Company, for this Orange County jury, you see, was on its way to hear a lawsuit that had been brought against the Otis Elevator Company.

Or here's another story that can be labeled "rotten luck", Gary Tindle stood before a California Judge charged with armed robbery. The Judge granted him permission to go to the Men's Room. A guard stood outside the door, but during that short period of time, Gary Tindle made a break for freedom....opening a panel in the ceiling and then somehow scrambling into the crawl space above the ceiling. As he was crawling along the panels gave way and Gary dropped back to the floor, right in front of the witness stand in the Judge's courtroom. Packaged and delivered for judgement. Poetic justice? Of all the "rotten luck"!

DEVELOPMENT

The Bible has a few stories that carry the label "of all the rotten luck". Here's one. Ten brothers are insanely jealous because their father, Jacob, is expressing too much love for their younger kid-brother. And moreover, that spoiled little brother dreams of being glorious, of being paid homage at some future family reunion. It's sickening. The hot-temper TEN tire of the brat strutting around in a coat of many colors and sharing some egotistical dreams...

"He's pulling us down! We can't reach our potential with him around. In our next synagogue directory, we will make sure that Joseph is not in our family portrait!"

And so one day they stumble upon an opportunity to rid themselves of this nuisance. They can't bring themselves to kill him, although the vote was quite close. Instead, they accept the best bid for a strong young slave from some merchants passing through their neighborhood on that eastern Mediterranean trade route. And things were better right away....oh, so much better.

"We are at last rid of our annoying brother who has vexed us with his arrogant dreams. This is too easy. We'll have to tell Dad he's been killed in the wilderness by a wild animal. He'll be sure to believe us...."

And their plan goes off without a hitch. No questions raised. These ten trusted sons of Jacob produce a bloody coat showing how Joseph must have met his untimely death. Jacob recognizes his gift to Joseph...the coat of many colors...now covered with the blood of a goat. They enter it as evidence. Boy, they could have used some forensic analysis, some swabs and perhaps DNA testing back there 4,000 years ago. Why it seems like the perfect crime. Slim are the chances for retribution.

But no sooner had the brothers TEN divorced themselves from Joseph then he, Joseph, hits the "jackpot". Not a jackpot of chance, but rather God's blessing upon Joseph became evident as he rises rather quickly to prominence, becoming a favorite advisor to the Pharoah down in Egypt.

Ibid. Line 163

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from
heaven

Upon the place beneath. It is twice
bless'd:

It blesseth him that gives and him that
takes.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest: it be-
comes

The throned monarch better than his
crown;

His sceptre shows the force of temporal
power,

The attribute to awe and majesty,

Wherein doth sit the dread and fear of
kings;

But mercy is above this sceptred sway,

It is enthroned in the hearts of kings,

It is an attribute to God himself;

And earthly power doth then show lik-
est God's,

When mercy seasons justice. Therefore,
Jew,

Though justice be thy plea, consider
this,

That in the course of justice, none of us
Should see salvation: we do pray for

mercy;

And that same prayer doth teach us all
to render

The deeds of mercy.

Ibid. Line 184

To do a great right, do a little wrong.

Ibid. Line 216

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Most of you, I'm sure, are familiar with how his resume must have appeared. Some helpful references may have been attached to it as to his character, too. He resisted Potiphar's wife's advances. He goes on to become an effective administrator of Egypt's domestic economic policy, devising and implementing a sound policy of agricultural production and storage which helps Egypt avert a serious disaster. By now, Joseph is at the peak of his political power and prestige, and guess who should one day drop in on him?

Yes, his brothers - call them the Treacherous Ten. Years had passed by since their heartless crime. That entire region now was crippled by a severe drought. The situation had become desperate for Jacob's family, but there was a glimmer of hope. The rumor is that Egypt has grain. Jacob spells out relief to his sons - E-G-Y-P-T. No rain, but they had grain....because of some brilliant administrator who had both predicted and prepared them for the crop failures. And now this wise man was the benevolent czar of a sort of international soup kitchen. Jacob had the ten brothers pack their gear and head for Egypt.

Now the Treacherous Ten are still fugitives from an unrequited crime. They are soon to drop into the courtroom of the very one who is the chief witness - the prosecutor, the judge and jury all wrapped up into one. The ceiling of Providence has for years been strong enough and sturdy enough to hold these unrepentant brothers above the courtroom of justice and judgement...slithering in the dark crawl space of their evil and despicable ways and lies. But the ceiling now splinters under the weight of their crime. The timbers holding them safe above judgement are now collapsing. And all ten drop in front of the very witness stand of the most powerful administrator in all of Egypt's land. Packaged and delivered for judgement by Divine Providence. Of "all the rotten luck!"

Joseph recognizes his brothers TEN. He knows the Treacherous Ten - each of them by name! Indeed, how could he ever forget them? These men comprise his own TEN MOST WANTED MEN LIST, now delivered into his hands by God....all in a single package. Not by Express Mail or by United Parcel, but in God's good and great timing, the package has finally arrived. Patience. Persistence.

Now, if you've never heard this story before, you must now be wondering what's going to happen next. The fuse to Joseph's indignation is not lit and the reader begins to brace for the inevitable fireworks. Poetic justice? How we love such stories....the hero rising out of the pit to enact vengeance on the bad boys and we say to ourselves... 'bout time! We're ready for the explosion, for the fireworks, but the expected eruption of Joseph's anger doesn't happen right away. You wonder: has the fuse been snuffed out. What has happened. No fireworks. The brothers TEN have not yet recognized Joseph and so the reader thinks....

"Okay....this is a delicious twist. Wonderful drama. Clearly Joseph is playing with these ten doomed treacherous traitors as a cat would paw and tease its prey...let's watch what happens."

For now, I will by-pass the intervening narrative and streamline straight to that wonderful moment of truth in chapter 45 when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" Why, these words must have fallen like an axe on his unsuspecting, awestruck and disbelieving audience. The ten stunned fugitives cannot master an answer. They stand there - speechless.

Of "All the rotten luck"...there they stand!

Well...the next few minutes must have seemed like eternity to the ten treacherous brothers. Some repressed memories began to surface. The pit. The coat. The blood. The tears that Jacob shed. Bandaged but unhealed guilt is now freshly mingled with surges of sheer terror. One can easily imagine the ten could close their eyes and hear the execution order being given.

Joseph whispered, "Come closer to me". Is this a well-planned form of revenge....the revenge Joseph has envisioned for so long.....is Joseph teasing the ten, savoring the sweetness of revenge by "sipping it" like fine wine rather than gulping it in one terrible swallow? Listen carefully as he speaks..."I am your brother....Joseph....whom you sold into slavery...in Egypt".

At last! The indictment is read. The crime has been named. As the brothers stand there...shaking in their sandals....the media edging closer to catch all that is being said. Surely the words of Joseph will now pronounce the well-deserved sentence. The verdict is coming...

BUT, Joseph's next words boggle the imagination. The awful drumbeat of poetic justice ceases abruptly, replaced by soft sounds of mercy. Hear them.

"Now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here... for God sent me before you to preserve life....so it was not you who sent me here, but God!" The brothers TEN meant it for evil, but GOD meant it for good.

One cannot help but wonder how long Joseph must have seethed with anger in his heart...dreaming of this moment of revenge. Days? Weeks? Months? Years? Who knows. And perhaps Joseph would gleefully shed their blood if Providence had dropped these TEN into his lap even a single day sooner.

But today, Joseph had "risen above blame". And how does one explain that? Clearly....I believe that Joseph's merciful stance and actions rest upon his unwavering belief in providence. As dark and as disorienting as this valley was and had been for him, he had always somehow managed to hold on to his sense of God's presence at work in his own life. Make no mistake. He had much about which to be bitter and who could have blamed him if, (in the words of Isaiah) he...

"Put on garments of vengeance for clothing
and wrap himself in fury as in a mantle"
(Isaiah 59: 17)

But vengeance was not a becoming garment upon this royal man. His shoulders were worthy of finer materials. He wore a coat brilliant with the HUES of mercy.

This is a beautiful story of God's justice and providence. A wronged hero rising from injustice to vanquish the elusive enemy. And don't miss the essential connection between providence and mercy. A recognition of divine providence allowed this man to rise above difficult and personal circumstances...to rise above blame, to put on the garments of mercy rather than bitterness.

Could this be the reason this story has endured across the centuries? Yes.

A woman made an appointment to discuss a problem with her pastor. She was angry at a man in her community who had clearly wronged her. The two of them, once close friends, had had a falling out and were now polarized. They would not speak. They lived in a small town and could not avoid seeing each other....at church, at the super market, at the post office...but there was no sign of reconciliation. No attempt to apologize was made by the man. The pain had gone on for several months, and now she sat with her minister and said to him, "I just have to forgive him....." Her pastor, playing Devil's Advocate, offered these words,

"Why? He's admitted no wrong....he has not apologized or sought forgiveness....he's shown no interest in repairing the relationship.....hy should you want to forgive him?"

She said,

"Pastor....I cannot stand the anger anymore....my stomach is in knots. I can't sleep at night.....and I'm afraid I'll bump into him wherever I go around town and I hate the tension that causes. I have to forgive him just for me.....even if not necessarily for him...."

It seems to me that she was experiencing a wonderful "by-product" of forgiveness. It is the method of choice for stress reduction. Forgiving one another...even if only "one-way" forgiveness, is wonderful therapy for bruised emotions. And whether it's acknowledged by the second party or not, it is quite liberating. It is simply more healthy to forgive than to resent. Try it. The foundation of "one-way" forgiveness shows a strong trust in God's providence, it's a firm belief that all will "work together for good to those who love God" and trust in His ways of love.

I've often wondered how long Joseph allowed his heart to be a safe harbor for hatred and anger and revenge. We have no idea how much sleep he lost, how long his stomach was tied up in knots....how long he lusted for that moment of revenge, for the show-down. I'm sure it must have been a long time. I think it was Francis Bacon who once said that,

"a man who studies revenge keeps his wounds green,
which would otherwise heal and do well....."

I'd like to believe that Joseph's wounds healed nicely when his desire to get even finally faded away, and when he stopped seeing the hand dealt him as merely "rotten luck". The conviction that he was ultimately on "God's hand" rather than an instrument of mere chance and circumstance enabled him to rise above the circumstances, to rise above bitterness and blame.

Corrie Ten Boom once compared PROVIDENCE to EMBROIDERY. No matter how beautiful the art work, one sees only a tangled mess on the reverse side. Right? As long as Joseph's eyes were on the tangled mess of his brothers' evil intent, he could harbor anger and bitterness, but when he looked "in faith" at the final product of providence, he was able to look past the events which had brought him to where he was.

"Life" someone has said, "is like a piano...it's how you play it!"

One of my all-time favorite hymns, no longer in our hymn book, but one I learned as a youth and loved to sing. William Cowper's wonderful words, penned back in 1774...provide me with the closing of this episode from Joseph's life,

"God moves in a myserious way, His wonders to perform,
He plants His footsteps in the sea, and rides upon
the storm.
Ye fearful saints fresh courage take, the clouds you
so much dread.
Are big with mercy and shall break in blessings on
Thy head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him
for His grace.
Behind an angry providence, He hides a smiling face.

Blind unbelief is sure to err and scan His work in
vain.
God is His own interpreter, and He shall make it plain!"

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness and to Your presence in these quiet moments, O God. Wrestle with us, in those shadowy corners of our lives where fear and lack of faith persist, where anger and a desire for revenge may be lurking. Rekindle our faith. Help us to take the leap of faith....to believe that all things do work together for good for those who love You.

Heal those whom we mention in the privacy of our thoughts in this time of worship. Help us to run the course...well and faithfully...for the race is so short and we would try to run it well and always to Your glory.
Amen.