

“A Good Example”
Genesis (37), 45: 1-15
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Since childhood I have always watched the Olympics. Time was when I could identify with the athletes. I could imagine myself as one of them running, jumping, twisting, and swimming. The Olympic athletes were inspiring examples of what I hoped to do someday.

I still watch, but with a different eye. They are still very inspiring, and I still watch them in awe, but it is an awe which excludes me. They may still be examples for young people, but no longer for me. Bodies age, things hurt, reflexes aren't what they used to be, stamina falters.

Jack Handey, writing in the *New York Times Magazine* a couple of weeks ago depicted in a humorous way my experience with the games. In a piece entitled “Tryouts and Errors: My Olympic Record” he cataloged his personal history with the games, how it actually was, and not as he either aspired to or dreamed about. It's not an inspiring example.

100 meter dash: Couldn't finish, too far.

10-meter diving: platform too high

Swimming: starting block too high

Marathon: got lost

Boxing: Knocked out, knocked out, knocked out. Put boxing gloves back up on the top shelf; they fell off and knocked me out.

Uneven bars: Not sure how to get onto upper bar

Balance beam: I have no idea what this is

Victory lap: Apparently there is no such event.¹

You get the idea. He is not much of an example of “faster, higher, stronger.” But perhaps Handy provides an example of a different kind.

Convinced that we are the sum of our accomplishments, we press on. Limits are for other people. Somehow we will be an exception. Somehow we will all be Michael Phelps. By fantasy or compulsion you and I strive “faster, higher, stronger.”

And we have a way of projecting that striving onto others. We ask of others to be our coach in achievement. We even ask of scripture that it confirm our best view of ourselves. In scripture we hope to find the moral example to live by, the inspiration to strive higher, stronger, faster.²

¹ Jack Handey, “Tryouts and Errors: My Olympic Record,” *New York Times Magazine* (August 3, 2008), p. 76.

Moral exhortation is surely in scripture, but examples of people who actually demonstrate that moral example are few. For example, take this extended story of Joseph and his brothers.

The pampered, doted upon youngest of twelve brothers and one sister. The child born to Israel in his old age. Mary Gordon writes of Adam Hochschild,

The . . . child of older parents leads an unreal life. From the start his is worshiped like the Christ Child; he has made his parents, by his very birth, prodigious. The mother stands out among her equals, a living river of fecundity that mocks the curse of age. The father can be seen by his coevals as the man they fear they can no longer be. The child is long awaited, or a windfall for which his parents never dared to hope. He is the subject of enormous expectations and fears. He looks with awe at the parents of his friends; less kind perhaps, less patient, certainly less tired. . . . The pressures exhaust him, and yet only with his parents is he truly happy; try as he may, he is not himself among the commoners.³

The Genesis text explicitly notes that Joseph was not only born to Israel at an advanced age, but also that of all the children he was the most beloved.

It is to such “commoners” – his own brothers – that Joseph is sent one day. So out of touch with their lives is he that he must ask around the neighborhood to locate them. In the meeting the brothers, out of range of the doting father, envy and jealously conspire in a dastardly plan to sell him. And by that deed do they bring a conspiracy of grief to their father and a life of unexpected fame to their despised brother now in Egypt.

Fast forward now many years to the famine which brings those same brothers to Egypt seeking relief. They are looking for food, and if it is food that you need, then it is before Joseph the you must stand. Years have changed Joseph’s appearance. Though he knows them, they do not recognize him. He toys with them, and finally amid many tears reveals himself to them.

The brothers are “dismayed,” and why not? We know what moral symmetry and come-uppance require in a scene like this. The soul singer James Brown called it The Big Payback. Revenge

² Characterizing the religious hazard of the malaise of moralism, and drawing on an athletic metaphor, Charles Taylor writes, “What emerges from all this is what we might call ‘moralism’, that is, that is, the crucial importance given to a certain code in our spiritual lives. We should all come closer to God; but at a crucial stage on this road has to be the minimal conformity to the code. Without this, you aren’t even at the starting line, as it were, of this crucial journey. You are not in the game at all. This is perhaps not an outlook which is easy to square with a reading of the New Testament, but it nevertheless achieved a kind of hegemony across broad reaches of the Christian church in the modern era.” Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p. 499.

³ Mary Gordon, “Adam Hochschild: Half the Way Home,” *Good Boys and Dead Girls and other Essays* (New York: Viking, 1991), p. 72.

has finally come to its day, and they must be made an example of, if not before history at least to the boys and girls to whom we read this story. They are bad examples and must be made to pay.

The Bible is filled with good examples, and this scene of brothers before the brother they sold is one of them. But it is not an example of faith or good behavior or loving relationships. It is an example of an outrageous forgiveness. Joseph, again amidst many tears, astonishingly forgives them. And he further offers his support and care for the whole family. He is the successful one, after all. As the writer of Genesis puts it, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” It’s an example of what God does over and over and over again.

The good example of this story for us is not moral, as we might have hoped. Moral examples can be a seductive alternative to radical, grace-overflowing Christianity. For “Christianity is not the move from vice to virtue, but rather the move from virtue to grace.”⁴

I repeat a true story I have told here before. When I was about ten years old they would bring the Sunday School kids to the big church service about four times a year. There we would all be filling the front rows before the big pulpit. The eighth row contained that day a misbehaving boy. He was awful, squirming and laughing, distracting the congregation, attracting faces attempting to send shame his direction.

Our pastor was Alf Kraabel, a big imposing man retired from military chaplaincy. Finally the pastor himself had had enough, stopped his sermon, left the pulpit, and marched with some speed into the middle of the chancel. From that high and raised up position his finger came out, and he pointed directly to the misbehaving boy. “You!” Kraabel thundered, “Get up here right now.” The congregation drew in their breath. No one exhaled.

“Yes, I mean you, come out here.” Slowly, with a look of sheer terror on his face the young rascal moved down the pews to the center isle. There he stood, I’m sure awaiting the earth to open up and him to fall in.

“No, not,” Kraabel insisted, “I want you to come up *here*.” Inching forward a half step at a time, over the next several moments, the boy moved to the chancel steps, and then up the steps until he stood directly in front of Pastor Kraabel. No one in the congregation breathed.

“Now!,” Kraabel thundered, as he reached into his pocket and retrieved a shiny round quarter. Kraabel reached forward toward the boy’s face and placed the quarter in the boy’s trembling hand, “Don’t you *ever* forget what grace means!”

That boy, I’m sure never forgot. I know of a congregation as well that never forgot that there was a grace lesson to be taught that was much more important than good behavior in church. Kraabel returned to the pulpit and continued preaching. He didn’t have to. The sermon had by that time been completed.

⁴ Attributed to Gerhard Forde.

Of course we are creatures of dignity and worth, capable of love and kindness. But we are also conflicted and confused, creatures called to faster, higher, stronger purpose and at the same time claimed by low desire.⁵ We are as “harried and hurried; as loving, kind, and giving; as selfish and self-centered, and as joyful and sad as we think we are.”⁶ We aspire to be good examples and are inspired by our Olympic heroes, but also harbor exaggerated notions of what we can accomplish. Our actual performance is more like that of Mr. Handey.

The Christian faith, if it ever provides a good example remains the example by which a Peter with an impetuous and weak faith is grabbed by Christ out of the deep water. If there is to be a good example here it will be of some very evil brothers who did a terrible thing to their young brother as examples for a breath-taking swoop of undeserved grace coming from the wronged brother himself. If there is to be an example here it will be of how dogs and Canaanite women also receive the gifts of God. If an example must be found here, let it be of a misbehaving boy in the eighth pew will never forget his misbehavior followed by a stunning example of grace before the whole congregation.

There will be another story like this of a brother sold out for a few pieces of silver.⁷ When that brother dies on the cross he comes back in resurrection. The remaining, betraying brothers will be “afraid,” for if there ever was a day for payback it is Easter. And contrary to what they could expect, he forgives them and enters into deep relationship with them. But it is not first of all an example of good behavior for our inspiration. That story, as this one, is a good example of God’s unexpected and stunning example of grace toward us. A good example of how folks like us move finally from virtue to grace. Amen.

⁵ “We are beings who can be called to high purpose and claimed by low desire.” Jean Bethke Elshtain, “Politics and Persons,” *The Journal of Religion*, Volume 86, Number 3 (July, 2006), 411.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ See William L. Holladay, “In solidarity with his brothers - the story of Joseph in the Bible - Genesis 45:1-15,” *The Christian Century*, July 31, 1996.