

Church in the Wild Devotional
June 10, 2018

People have let us down often enough that we can't help but wonder, "Can people change?" We have let ourselves and others down enough that we might wonder the same for ourselves.

Can people change? If by "change," we mean being completely free of brokenness, bitterness, bias, and compulsions, the honest answer is "No, not until Jesus re-creates us in resurrection will we be completely free of imperfections." But in the meantime, people can change!

This week was the 50th anniversary of Robert F. Kennedy's assassination. Recently I read of Bobby's transformation after his brother's assassination. Prior to 1963, he was "ruthless." Bobby helped Joseph McCarthy smear people as communists and was his brother's "hatchet man." But in the months after his JFK's death, Bobby became profoundly concerned for disadvantaged people. Even those who disagreed with his liberal policy prescriptions sensed his sincerity. The ruthless fixer from the rich family developed a soft heart for desperately poor people in big-city slums, rural Appalachia, and the Mississippi Delta. So why the change? The catalyst was pain, which apparently drew him deeper into his Roman Catholic faith. Bobby's anguish over Jack's murder broke open his heart to other people's suffering. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered, Bobby calmed an angry crowd by reminding them of his loss and quoting the ancient Greek poet Aeschylus:

Even in our sleep, pain which cannot forget falls drop by drop upon the heart, until, in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God

Suffering doesn't always lead to positive change; sometimes it leads to bitterness, depression, and suicide. Yet the grace of God always seeks to redeem "the awful". In his pain God shaped Joseph into a hard-working, capable, ethical, and deeply spiritual servant. And through their pain God shaped Joseph's brothers into different men. Genesis 44 chronicles how Joseph continued to test his brothers. Having his silver cup "planted" in Benjamin's sack of grain so he could accuse them of stealing, and seize his youngest brother as his prisoner. **Read Genesis 44:14-34 to learn how his brothers responded.**

When Joseph's brother's "threw themselves to the ground before him," the dream that launched the saga was fulfilled. But how amazing to read that Judah offered his own life to spare Benjamin. It had been Judah's idea to sell Joseph as a slave to the Ishmaelites (37:26). After such blatant disregard for his brother years before, Judah now offered to be a slave in his younger brother's place. What made the difference? God working through Judah's pain. He was haunted by the memory of Joseph's screams from the pit (42:21-23) and saddened to see how Joseph's disappearance hurt their father Jacob.

I suspect that Joseph would have forgiven his brothers even if he didn't see such signs. Last Sunday we read (41:50-52) that before his brothers appeared, he named his sons Manasseh ("God has made me forget my trouble") and Ephraim ("God has made me fruitful in the land of my suffering). God's healing and divine purpose enabled Joseph to move on. But how much easier it was to forgive when he discovered that his brothers had changed! Because of their change in attitude, Joseph and his brothers can be authentically reconciled.

What about you? Are you allowing God to use your past or present suffering for shape your character? Are you open to the possibility that people who hurt you might also change?

As I've dealt with my own pain, God's "awful grace" has been opening my heart. After much prayer, I recently drafted a letter to someone from whom I've been estranged, requesting an opportunity to meet so I could make an apology. Previously I'd felt that this person should apologize first, but the Lord made me aware of His desire that I own my sin. The letter has been sent. I wait in the hope that God is at work.