

Message for Week 5: Take Responsibility

"I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever." Genesis 43:9

A Family's Dilemma

As we left the story last week, Joseph was in Egypt, longing to see his brother Benjamin again. Keeping Simeon in prison as a hostage, he had sent his nine brothers home with loads of grain, having secretly returned their money in their sacks of grain. The brothers went home feeling apprehensive, glad to have food for their families. But they were anxious about whether the Egyptian official (that they didn't recognize as Joseph) would enslave them when they returned, or whether something tragic might happen to Benjamin. Jacob was still grieving the loss of his beloved Rachel, the death of Joseph soon after that, and now the danger of losing Simeon. He refused to let Benjamin go to Egypt, fearing he would lose his one remaining child of Rachel. Reuben stepped forward and promised to ensure the safety of his brother. "If I don't bring back Benjamin, you can kill my two sons," Reuben promised. It seems that the thought of losing two of his grandchildren as a consequence of losing his son Benjamin was not comforting to Jacob, so he would not let Benjamin go. Furthermore, Jacob did not trust Reuben, because Reuben had betrayed Jacob by sleeping with Jacob's concubine Bilhah. Reuben was asking for Jacob's trust when he had proven himself untrustworthy. How could Jacob have faith in someone who had been unfaithful?

The Promise of Faith

In our spiritual life we progress step by step from a more worldly state to a more heavenly one. First we have to understand what God wants of us, then we must be willing to act on that understanding. Eventually we come to actually love other people and the Lord. The sons of Israel in their birth order symbolize stages of rebirth we go through. Reuben (whose name literally means "See--a son!") is the firstborn, representing our first sight of the truth. In the beginning we may have an intellectual acceptance of God without actually living the way He wants us to live--with love for others. Faith without love or charity promises salvation, but it doesn't actually change our hearts. It can't deliver on that promise. In fact, we may believe many truths, but when our emphasis is on truth we tend to forget the most important truth of all--the truth about love. When we put the emphasis on truth or on being right, we tend to be argumentative and kindness is lost. Moreover, faith without love is lacking its proper motivation and is easily linked to worldly and selfish desires, symbolized by Reuben's unfaithfulness. When we trust faith alone to make us loving, our spiritual life is lost. In a parallel way, trusting Reuben to take care of Benjamin could lead to the death of Reuben's sons.

The Promise of Good Motivation

Jacob's sons, knowing they would not be allowed to see Joseph or buy grain (and might be imprisoned or killed as spies) if they did not bring Benjamin, pleaded yet again with their father to let little Benjamin go to Egypt. (Benjamin was probably between 25 and 35 years old, but being the youngest, was still called a child.) This time Judah stepped forward to take responsibility for Benjamin. Judah's name means "praise" because his mother praised the Lord

at his birth. "Judah" symbolizes putting the focus on the Lord and on doing His will. We become "Judah" when we have advanced beyond mere faith (which is Reuben) to actually living a good life by keeping the Lord's commandments.

When Judah promises to take responsibility for Benjamin, Jacob trusts him (more than he did Reuben). "I myself will be surety for him," Judah said. "From my hand you shall require him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever" (Genesis 43:9). This is a turning point for the brothers because Judah's promise makes it possible for Benjamin to come with them to Egypt and eventually be reconciled with Joseph.

Asking for Help and Taking Responsibility

In our spiritual life there are two things that are necessary for us to progress. One is for us to turn from evil and do what is good as if we were doing it by our own power and initiative. The other is for us to recognize that it is the Lord who does these things in us.

"Order requires that we should do good as though on our own. So I should not stop my hand and think to myself, 'If I am unable to do anything good at all from myself I must wait for direct influence' and so remain inactive. This is also contrary to order. We should do good as if we were independent, but when we stop to reflect on the good we are doing or have done, we should think, acknowledge, and believe that the Lord present with us has accomplished it. If by thinking as described we give up acting as if on our own, we are not subjects into whom the Lord can operate." (Secrets of Heaven 1712)

"When people are going through trials they usually drop their hands and rely solely on prayers, which they then pour forth feverishly, unaware that such prayers achieve nothing, but that they should battle against the falsities and evils which the hells introduce. ...In the struggles of temptations furthermore we should fight as if we did so in our own strength, yet we should acknowledge and believe that we do so in the Lord's." (Secrets of Heaven 8179)

Last week's task and this week's task go hand in hand. We ask for help recognizing our powerlessness and need for the Lord, and we take responsibility for resisting selfish inclinations and serving others as if we were all on our own.

The Littlest Brother

Benjamin was the baby of the family. Even though he was probably in his late twenties or early thirties, they still called him a boy, because he represented the innocence and idealism of youth. One reason for this is that innocence is part of believing in love, and innocence is especially evident in children. The wisest angels are also innocent, and in fact it is their innocence that makes them so wise.

When Jesus taught us to care for each other, He especially encouraged us to help those who poor, oppressed, hurting and needy. "If you have done it to one of the *least* of these My brothers, you have done it to Me" (Matthew 25:40). "Whoever receives this little child in My name receives Me" (Luke 9:48, Mark 9:37).

Judah took responsibility for Benjamin, the least and most innocent of all the brothers. Our task is to take responsibility for the the younger, the weaker, the more innocent.

Benjamin as the Intermediary

When Joseph's brothers first came to Egypt he demanded that they bring their youngest brother or they would not see him again. So the second time they went to Egypt they took Benjamin with them, and they were able to see Joseph, and eventually be reconciled with him. Benjamin has the pivotal role in this story. Without him there is no hope of the brothers reconciling with Joseph. With him, everything works out and the family is reunited. Benjamin is the intermediary who brings the rest together.

The teachings for the New Church tell us that Benjamin represents truth, but a different kind of truth than we find pictured in Reuben or Simeon. We can look at the 12 sons of Jacob as 12 steps in our spiritual Journey. Reuben, named from "seeing," is our ability to see the truth; when we first see it, though, our heart may not be in it. Even when we believe it, it is faith that we understand, not faith that we love. In the beginning of our spiritual journey we tend to be rather self-centered, and we look at truth in terms of how it impacts ourselves. "What will I get out of it? Is there any advantage to me in believing that? If it proves that I'm right, it must be true!"

The second son Simeon, named from "hearing" or "obeying," is truth that we pay attention to and act on, but it still isn't coming from the heart. We force ourselves to do what is right even though we don't feel like it; our hearts are not in it.

Skipping ahead, Benjamin, "the son of the right hand," is the last son, the truth we see after we have been through a long process of growth and change. "The right hand" is a symbol of coming from love--you may remember Jesus' parable about people who show love to the hungry, thirsty, naked, estranged, sick and imprisoned; He put those loving people at His right hand. When we come from a place of love we see truth in a new way. It may be truth we have always known and believed, but it is new and different when we look at it from love. We come to see truth not as an objective reality that we try to understand, but rather as an expression of love. When we truly love the Lord we come to see that Divine Truth is simply an expression of God's love for us. When we truly love other people, we become willing to listen to them enough to actually see things from their point of view. This is a whole new perspective on the truth. This new perspective--seeing truth from the viewpoint of love--is what Benjamin represents in our spiritual life.

Another way to look at Benjamin is that he is the truth about love or the idea of love. There are many things that we can learn about the Lord, the Bible, heaven, regeneration, and so on. Sometimes it is hard to reconcile all these ideas, and sometimes we argue about which are most important. The truth about love is a deeper truth that can reconcile various Biblical teachings, various viewpoints, even various religions.

Losing Benjamin

In the process of learning how to love others it takes time to get to the point where we consistently and effectively show our love. Having genuine love means overcoming selfishness and materialism, resentment, anger, addiction, and so on, and while we are working on those things, it seems as if the love is gone. Still, we believe that love is possible and we cling to the

ideal of being genuinely loving even when we are unable to feel it or practice it. This is where we are when Jacob thought that Joseph had died, so he clung to Benjamin instead. Love seems to have died, so we cling to the idea of love as a possibility. For example, two people marry, filled with love for each other, and willing to give up anything to be together. Later on, they find that some things are hard to give up, especially when they are not getting what they expect from the marriage. The marriage becomes drudgery, and love--Joseph--is gone, or has been enslaved. Still the partners cling to the hope that marriage should be and can be something more. If we have lost our love for each other, at least we can believe that love is possible. That hope is Benjamin, and as long as it stays alive, the marriage can survive. Benjamin was all Jacob had left to remind him of his love for Rachel. Jacob's fear that something might happen to Benjamin relates to our fear in times of trouble that our ideals and cherished beliefs may not be true, or that love is not real. If we lose Benjamin we not only fail to show love, but we fail to believe in love, and something good in us dies of grief.

Judah's Commitment

Judah was willing to take responsibility for Benjamin's welfare, and in doing so was also providing food for the whole family. In our spiritual life we must take similar responsibility, not only for those who are weak and innocent, but also for being true to our ideals, for fostering hope and believing in the power and possibility of love and goodness. This doesn't mean being perfect, or changing the world. If we take responsibilities in small ways, it will be a step towards spiritual growth and the eventual triumph of love. Jesus said, "He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much" (Luke 16:10), and in a parable says to His servants, "Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things" (Matthew 25:21).

Your task for this week is to take responsibility. Take responsibility for yourself--for your own feelings and intentions, your own words and actions. When you have hurt someone, accept responsibility for what you have done, and be responsible for avoiding that behavior in the future. Don't take responsibility for other people's feelings, decisions and behavior, but look for ways to take responsibility to those who are weak and innocent--for the people who really need your help.