

October 10, 2021

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When Good Intentions go Bad

La Verne Church of the Brethren

Genesis 42:1-7 (NIV)

Proverbs 16:1-3 (NET)

You remember the story of Joseph in the Old Testament: how he was the youngest of 12 brothers, but his mother's favorite (she even made him an expensive coat of many colors... none of the rest of them got one of those); how, out of jealousy, his brothers sold him to a passing caravan and he wound up as a slave in Egypt; how he then came into favor of the Pharaoh, who made him the overseer of the nation's food reserves; and then his brothers come up from Palestine to get food during the famine and Joseph forgives them in a dramatic display of mercy and compassion. That's the way we remember it. Joseph, the man with the plan; the man of intention, the hero who saves the day, saves his people, saves Egypt.

You might be interested in another version of that story. In Parashat Vayigash, a Hebrew interpretation of the Torah, it's a bit different: Joseph's good intentions go sour. He has his hands full managing the seven years of catastrophic famine that has followed seven years of prosperity. But the Egyptian people are now starving while Pharaoh has all of the food, since Joseph has stored much of the harvest during years of plenty. But the people's ability to buy grain from the government disappears along with their savings. The famine has yet to play out its course, and this is where it begins to fall apart. Joseph begins to collect their possessions for the king in exchange for food: first their livestock, then their property and finally their personhood. To avoid death, the Egyptian people become slaves to Pharaoh, foreshadowing the Israelite enslavement in Exodus. Well, they at least have something to eat!

Does the end justify the means?

The ethicist Leon Kass doesn't think so, condemning Joseph for introducing into Egypt the idea that human beings can be owned by the state:

(Quote): "Israel is...cursed by Joseph's policies...Joseph's consolidation of Pharaoh's power will result in the practice of wholesale slavery. Thanks to Joseph's authoritarian policies, Egypt is transformed into a nation of slaves and Pharaoh becomes Egypt's absolute master." (end quote)

Sometimes the best of intentions can lead to tragic outcomes.

Joseph's policy echoes down through history. Debt bondage is not just an ancient problem. It's the most prevalent form of slavery found today, with millions of modern slaves serving as bonded laborers. And while it is most often found in India and southeast Asia, incidents of debt bondage can be found all around the world. Like Egypt's seven years of famine, debt bondage often starts with a short-term financial

crisis. Faced with an urgent medical issue or a bad harvest, or the car doesn't work...a person borrows a small sum.

But, there are additional fees, interest and penalties balloon the loan beyond its original size. Unable to repay the loan, the borrower becomes enslaved to his or her creditor, who might also, in some societies, sell the children of the debtor against the debt. But no one faced with starvation or a critically ill family member could ever envision that the act of taking a loan would lead to enslavement, violence and poverty for generations. Yet it happens.

And here's the piece we don't like to hear: we all benefit from it. We're all complicit in it. Slave-produced goods are ubiquitous in American markets. Last month, the United States Department of Labor released a list of 122 goods produced in 58 countries and imported to the United States that are the work of child or forced labor. These include some imports of everyday products like cotton, coffee, sugarcane and cocoa.

With all of the prosperity of today's world, no one should be forced to make the choice that lay before the Egyptians of Joseph's day: freedom or starvation—especially when the consequences can potentially last for generations. But we can interrupt this cycle through the choices we make as consumers and the steps we take as activists. If we simply open our eyes to the injustice in our midst, we can see the path towards ending slavery in our lifetime.

The Road to Hell is Paved with Good Intentions. I absolutely love this maxim. Whoever came up with it is an incredible genius. It helps explain most of the problems in the world.

Very few people have *bad* intentions. But most of the problems in the world are caused by what start out as *good* intentions. They may not seem good to us, but they seem good to the one taking the action. Good intentions alone are not enough to make our actions moral.

Case in point: Christopher Columbus.

Since this is Columbus day weekend, I thought we might think a little bit about him: If you grew up in my generation in the United States, you might have been taught that Columbus was the courageous, far sighted hero who discovered America in 1492. But, you know... he wasn't the first European in America. He didn't discover anything that millions of indigenous people who lived here didn't already know existed. He didn't land on the North American continent, he landed in Haiti. He thought he was in the East Indies (you know, Indonesia, south of the Philippines, south of Vietnam – that's where he thought he was, so he called the natives "Indians," and it stuck.)

Here's something you might not know about Columbus: he was uber-religious. He wasn't Spanish, but he was sailing for the Spanish King and Queen, Ferdinand and Isabella, to bring back spices and gold to make them rich. Why? Because Ferdinand

was the only European monarch to have any success in the Crusades, and Columbus believed that if he could make Ferdinand rich, he could throw out the Muslims in Jerusalem, re-build the Temple and then Jesus would come. And Columbus could make that happen. His diaries are full of that stuff. You think I'm kidding don't you? They didn't teach you that did they? It's true.

Now, you and I think about that and go,,, whaaaattt? And... we are not likely to look past the whole crusades business – especially from a pacifist perspective. And I don't know about you, but the whole “build the temple and he will come” thing just sounds crazy. But, that form of piety was really not unusual for his time.

Religion soared during the Renaissance in the 15th century. New cathedrals, new monasteries and convents, a great surge in the writing and circulation of devotional literature, like Thomas à Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*; sacraments, rituals, mysticism, pilgrimages, education. The sky's the limit. We can do it. Let's do it! Build that temple. We can entice God. That was the culture of the Renaissance. Columbus was all about that.

I don't know if you're willing to even give Columbus that much credit, but you might at least say that, given his time and culture, if all that was true, he was... well intentioned. But if *that's* true, then this is certainly a case where the best of intentions can lead to tragic outcomes.

After Christopher Columbus stumbled upon the island we know as Haiti some 520 years ago, he systematically killed, tortured, enslaved and all but destroyed the indigenous Taino people. While Columbus and his crew are sometimes lumped in with all the other conquest-crazy Europeans of their era, their particular cruelty can't be so easily exonerated and shouldn't be ignored.

Natives were regularly whipped and tortured for minor offenses —stealing a vegetable or animal; Columbus took Taíno women and gifted them to his crewmen, who would violently beat and abuse them. Columbus established a business in the sale of 9- and 10-year-old Taíno girls for sexual slavery. He also kidnapped and enslaved Taínos for the slave trade in his voyage back to Europe.

What a jerk.

Columbus was a murderous, enslaving, sexual-abusing, treacherous colonizer to the peoples he encountered in the Caribbean.

And his practice of taking other peoples' lands in the Americas sparked the European imagination, and those lands would soon be the backbones of empires.

What followed was centuries of oppression — to the human beings who lived there, and to the land they lived on. Spain, France, England – later the United States brought in enslaved Africans to cultivate sugar to satisfy European palates.

Haiti remains the poorest country in the all of the Americas; This isn't because of some innate curse on Haiti. It's because its peoples, their labor, their lands, and their resources have long been embezzled without reparation. The insidious nature of the colonization of the Americas, which started in Haiti, because Columbus had a dream, a religious intention - created a system that kept indigenous peoples in slavery or perpetual poverty, to this very day.

There is a straight line from the genocidal practices of Columbus to the enslavement of Africans that first started in Haiti, to Thomas Jefferson's refusal to recognize Haiti, to the US invasion of Haiti in 1816, and all the rest, right down to the outrageous and horrifying treatment and deportation of Haitian migrants by the US Border Patrol just 4 weeks ago. Talk about Critical Race Theory: let's begin by being honest about that.

At any rate, it's why so many of us roll our eyes at the idea of celebrating Columbus Day, and prefer instead to remember Indigenous People's Day.

When good intentions go bad.

What can Joseph and Columbus teach us?

1st, good intentions in themselves are not bad. Right? We all need an aim, a purpose, a plan in life; time tested beliefs, like: Work hard. Love others - and, by definition, sacrifice for them - your family and loved ones. Respect others. Speak the truth. Believe in what you do. Stay healthy... principles, intentions.

If you've ever walked the labyrinth, you might know that the 6th station is called the "Station of Intention," where you are invited to think about living out your purpose. This year, this day, this hour, this moment – each is ripe for something. Can you make a distinction between what is important and what is urgent? Which are you doing? What are you eager to do? What are your hopes and dreams? "Dare to have a purpose firm." Get out of your rut. Someone said that a rut is just a grave with ends kicked out.

What is your heart's desire this week? This month? This year? Good intentions are not bad. We wrap our lives around them and they serve as an anchor.

2ndly, we should be clear that our intentions are as healthy and whole as we hope and believe they are. It might be my plan to live in an RV and travel around the US for the next 30 years, searching out the best pie ever made. But if I ask my wife about that, I might have to re-think that plan. How do I know if my intentions are healthy and whole? I can ask – "is it scriptural; is it something Jesus would do?" or read more about it, ask my doctor, or my therapist, or maybe one of you...? I mean, where were the people of

God when Jacob was working out his system of slavery, or when Columbus went off half-cocked?

But, 3rdly, good intentions require right means. The ends do not always justify the means:

You might want to be elected senator or congressman of your state, but if you devise a plan where a great number of people, black and brown can't vote for your opponent, you've crossed the line.

You might believe in personal freedom and don't want to wear a mask, but if that endangers children and others you are around, you've crossed over a line.

You might feel strongly about the morality of being pro-life, but if you are willing to take freedom away from women with unwanted pregnancies, silence doctors and strip reproductive health care away from millions of low income people; stand by while the maternal mortality rates skyrocket, and women, especially black women, die in childbirth, you might have entirely imagined that there never was a line.

If you believe in peace among nations, but you are willing to support the killing of your enemies;

If you say you love your family, but aren't willing to give them your time, your help and your love;

If you believe that all lives matter, but you can't endorse the idea that Black Lives Matter, or LGBTQ lives matter;

If you believe so fervently in your cause that you are willing to lie, cheat, steal for that cause;

If you feel hatred for someone who disagrees with you, and you foster harmful designs against them, if you engage in violence against an adversary or opponent, on line or in person, you probably crossed a line.

Martin Luther King Jr. stated, "On some positions cowardice asks the question, is it safe? Expediency asks the question, is it politic? Vanity asks the question, is it popular? But conscience asks the question, is it right? And there comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular but he must take it because conscience tells him it is right."

In this church, let's be clear about who we intend to be, and how we plan to get there.

I appreciated Pastor Susan's words in her sermon about the legacy of this congregation as a bold, courageous, loving, purposeful people. And that's right!

And may I say that Pastor Susan and Pastor Dawna have played a big part in helping us get there.

We are a church that seeks to continue the work of Jesus peacefully, simply, together. (Is that right? Say that's right!)

We are a church called by Christ to be inclusive, caring and peace-minded. And we mean it.

WE affirm that people of any race, ethnic identity, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, age, economic status, faith tradition, or life situation are welcome in our congregation. (Is that right? Say that's right!)

This church believes in compassionate service, stewardship of creation, respect for diversity and nonviolent reconciliation for differences among all people and nations. And we're not about to move away from that intention.

WE claim no creed but the New Testament, as exemplified by the life of Christ. And so we strive to follow the way of Jesus. (Is that right? Say that's right!)

We humbly stand today and proclaim:
Where hatred soars, we will speak of love.
Where fear stalks, we will stand with courage.
Where racism rises, we will call for justice.
Where pain overwhelms, we will extend comfort and compassion.
Where systems oppress, we will work for change.
Now and ever, now and ever, now and evermore.
Amen.