

When Life Gives You Lemons...
Rev. Becca Wieringa
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A man was traveling on a ship when it sank in the ocean. He managed to survive, and made a small raft of some of the ship's cargo and eventually drifted to a deserted island. He built a little shelter and lived on what little food he had been able to salvage from the wreckage. Time after time he had attempted unsuccessfully to attract the attention of a passing ship.

Finally, he saw a ship approaching more closely and hurriedly set a signal fire ablaze. Sadly, once again, the ship passed by and was quickly fading from sight. Worse, sparks from the signal fire set the thatched roof of his shelter in flames, and the man watched helplessly as all of his provision burned to ashes.

All was lost. The man knew he couldn't last much longer. Then suddenly he noticed that the ship which had passed him by was turning around and approaching the island more closely than before. To his great relief, he was seen by the crew and rescued. Once on board, the grateful survivor went to the captain of the ship to express his thanks.

"But what caused you to turn around after you had already passed by?" he asked. "Why, we saw the signal fire you made by setting your shelter on fire," the captain responded. "Ingenious!"

The very thing which seemed to seal the doom of this marooned man was the very means of his delivery. What seemed to spell disaster for him became an instrument of his salvation. The man realized that sometimes what seems to be the worst possible thing turns into something amazing!

Sometimes life gives us lemons. And what are we supposed to do with those lemons? MAKE LEMONADE! Of course! It's an old cliché, but sometimes it conveys the most appropriate sentiment. When things aren't going quite like you planned, when life is hard, when everything seems to fall apart, try to look at the positive, count your blessings, and remember even in the worst of times there is usually a silver lining.

But the question I have is, how? Is there a formula for seeing the silver lining? Is there a way to ignore the bad things and focus on the good? What does squeezing that lemon, adding some sugar and a little ice to it, and sitting out on the deck with your glass of lemonade and a big smile on your face really look like when applied to life's tough moments? Isn't that just denial?

This week we're talking about Joseph, Jacob's favorite son. Joseph was a celebrity in his family. He was dad's favorite and he had an amazing—if also annoying—God-given talent. Joseph could interpret dreams! In our culture, we might think of that as a racket at best, sorcery at worst. But in the context of ancient Israel, the people believed God spoke to them through visions and dreams, and the key to understanding them was having someone who could interpret them for you.

Joseph had a roller coast of a life story. He went from arrogant youth who had enjoyed a position of honor in his wealthy family, to desolation and slavery, to working his way to the top, to,

finally, becoming an honorable and humble man, famous and well-loved by all. Joseph learned how to turn the sourest of lemons into lemonade, and how to enjoy it in style.

Joseph was the first son born to Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife. Jacob so loved Joseph that he made him a beautiful multi-colored coat with long sleeves, an indication not just that Joseph was well loved, but also that he was not meant to work—he was meant for the finer things in life!

Joseph's brothers were super jealous, of course. Add to that Joseph dreamt about his brothers bowing down to him and you probably can understand the sibling rivalry. Finally, they decided they couldn't take the favoritism any longer. They ripped Joseph's coat off of him, threw him in a pit, and sold him into slavery. This was the first of many lemons Joseph is handed.

The brothers told their father that Joseph was eaten by a lion, giving him the bloody, shredded coat and devastating their poor dad.

Joseph was sold as a slave in Egypt to a man named Potiphar. After a while, though, Potiphar saw more in Joseph than just a common laborer. He saw goodness and a potential for leadership. So he put Joseph in charge of his household and even gave him a new coat, replacing the beloved one that had been stolen from him.

Now Potiphar had a beautiful wife who wanted Joseph, and she tried to seduce him. But Joseph refused, out of loyalty to his boss. The wife became angry and told her husband that Joseph tried to attack her! Joseph gets another lemon—he was thrown in prison for something he did not do.

Joseph spent years in that deep, dark dungeon, but even there he impressed the prison warden, who put him in charge of the other prisoners.

Meanwhile, God continued giving Joseph the gift of interpreting dreams and while in prison, Joseph interpreted dreams for the chief cup bearer and baker, one of whom promised to remember Joseph after he was released from prison and to ask the Pharaoh for his release, but once he got out of prison, the man forgot his promise. And Joseph found in his hands yet another lemon.

More time passed and then Joseph was called to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh, the ruler of all of Egypt. When Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams, preparing the land for a great famine to come, Pharaoh made him prime minister in charge of social and economic affairs. This meant Joseph was to manage the resources of the entire empire.

Finally, after years of life giving Joseph one lemon after another, Joseph found himself in a position of power, dressed in a beautiful, fine cloak, enjoying his proverbial lemonade. Only Pharaoh was greater than Joseph—Joseph had become his right hand man.

We can learn a lot from Joseph, who did not simply pile his lemons and cry out to God in anguish, asking God, What did I deserve to get all this sour fruit thrown at me?

Instead, with every lemon, Joseph figured out how to make lemonade. With every dark, stormy cloud in his life Joseph found the silver lining and gave God thanks for the journey, both the good and the bad.

When he was sold into slavery and sent so far away from his beloved father, Joseph added the sweetness of hard work and enjoyed the lemonade of supervising other servants and holding a position of authority within Potiphar's home.

When he was thrown into prison for something he did not do, Joseph added the sweetness of obedience to God, humility and respect for the warden, and he drank the lemonade of interpreting dreams and having them come true, thus showing those in power that he was a man with a connection to God—a man who could be trusted.

When he was given the lemon of a broken promise, Joseph added the sweetness of patience until finally he was given an audience with the Pharaoh, the most powerful man in all the land. He was able to drink the lemonade of power, comfort, and a life of luxury

But Joseph's story did not end there. When the famine struck it hit hard in Joseph's homeland of Canaan, where his father and brothers still lived. They heard that there as grain stored up in Egypt, so out of desperation they decided to go buy some grain, not knowing who it was they would be buying from!

Now here was Joseph, standing over his brothers – remembering the life he lost because of what they did to him, lamenting the time he could have had with his father, all those years that were stolen. Finally, Joseph had the ultimate chance for retribution, a chance few of us ever get. And truthfully, doesn't Joseph deserve some payback?

But Joseph had turned his lemons into the sweetest lemonade. He had come to view the lemons as gifts from God, signs of God's love and providence, pathways to an incredible life of comfort and wealth.

In Genesis 45, Joseph said this to his brothers:

“I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?” His brothers were speechless!

“Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt. But don't feel badly, don't blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives.

There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn't you who sent me here but God.”

Unbelievably, Joseph has so successfully turned the lemons in his life to such sweet lemonade that he was able to see how had always been with him. He did not blame his brothers, but celebrated the entire journey as a gift from God.

Joseph realized what the apostle Paul will later remind us in Romans 8:28, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to God’s purpose.”

Throughout Joseph’s life God had been working all things together for good. Because of Joseph’s willingness to take the lemons and make lemonade, God not only delivered him from his own sourness, but delivered all the land of Egypt, and the land of Canaan, Joseph’s “home town.”

Though the famine raged on, all those under Joseph’s care were well fed and lacked nothing. Through the lemons in Joseph’s life, God saved an entire people.

Lemons are a part of life. Lemons can make things so very sour and difficult. 9 years ago, I graduated from seminary and moved from Ohio to Michigan. I had been hired as the new Director of Christian Education at a large, downtown United Methodist church, and I was so excited. It was a new position and I would be the first person doing the job at this particular church, and so I spent those first several weeks envisioning who I was to be and where God was going to lead this congregation.

And then, just four months later, the position suddenly ended. The church changed its mind, if you will. They said, we love you, but we can’t use you. They eliminated the position, gave me my final paycheck, and sent me on my way.

I was devastated. Seriously. It was like a truckload of lemons were dumped on me. I had so many hopes for this new job. I’d moved to Michigan for the job. My family lived out here and my friends were scattered. I was hurt and angry. I thought about giving up, moving back home, finding a job that had nothing to do with the church and simply starting over.

But God had put this call in my heart, and I knew that I could not just throw it away. So I started trying to figure out what to do with all those lemons.

Then, just a few weeks later, I was hired as the Director of Christian Education at another church. I was relieved to have a job again, but at that moment I had no idea that it would be the best thing to ever happen for me, and would completely reorganize my life. I was able to live fully into my calling, to preach and teach, to work with kids and youth and be involved in worship planning and pastoral care. I grew as a leader, a minister, a human being so much in those few years, and I discovered a passion, and a calling, for pastoral ministry. On top of it, Grand Rapids is where I met my now husband and step children, and made friends I still have today.

My three years at that church prepared me for ministry in my own church in ways I could never have envisioned when I first got handed all those lemons.

I could have thrown everything away, moved home, tried to become a middle school teacher (which had always been my back up plan!) I thought about it. And it might have ended up okay.

But instead, I trusted that God had not led me all the way there for nothing. I believed that there had to be a way to turn those lemons into lemonade. And when I did, it was remarkable and so sweet.

We all get handed lemons sometimes. Today maybe some of you are holding a few lemons of your own. Maybe things seem a little hopeless. Maybe you're angry and lamenting the way things have turned out. Maybe you're distraught and sad and trying to figure out how everything fell apart when you did everything in your power to hold it together. Maybe you're out of money. Lemons everywhere.

Maybe you're in pain and awaiting surgery, or struggling to heal from an illness. Maybe you're dealing with family issues, or work issues, or you're angry with the church or your parents or your best friend. Maybe you made some mistakes. Maybe you did everything absolutely right and still, there they are, in your lap, a pile of lemons.

From a less personal stance, it seems like we are surrounded by lemons. Everyday there is more to worry about, more chaos, more people out of work, on the street, more people fighting violence and discrimination because of the refusal of the powers to enforce universal human rights or stand up for human dignity.

It's hard to find enough sugar in all of this to make the lemonade.

But grace is the substance that adds sweetness to our life. God's grace gets us through when things seem hopeless. God's grace gives us the strength to face the sourness of pain, grief and injustice.

In the story of Joseph we are reminded that God did not promise a life free from tribulation. Instead, Joseph's life and indeed all of scripture is full of stories of persecution, trials, pain, disappointment and injustice. But it is also a story of healing, redemption, restoration, and amazing grace. Even when things are at their worst, God is the hope that gets us through, reminding us that there is a greater purpose in all that we see, do, and experience. God's Grace is not just a nice idea... Grace is the means by which we turn lemons into lemonades.

Amen.