

Taking Responsibility

A Sermon by the Rt. Rev. Peter Buss, Jr.
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Then Judah said to Israel his father, “Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die.... I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him.” (Genesis 43:8-9)

“It’s my fault, and I take full responsibility for it.” “I will take that on; you can count on me to see it through.” “I will live up to my commitments.” “This group of people is my responsibility, and I will do my very best to protect them.” There is something noble about these sentiments. When people stand up and take responsibility, we rightfully honor them. We also strive to live by these values ourselves.

Our Biblical focus for today is a portion of the story of Joseph, during which Judah takes responsibility for the safety of his youngest brother, Benjamin. We pick up that story during a time of great famine—the seven years of lack after the previous seven years of plenty. Joseph had overseen a storing up of grain during the seven years of plenty, knowing from the Lord that they would be followed by seven years of famine. Now, in the middle of those harsh years, his brothers have to come down to Egypt a second time to buy grain, since Egypt is the only place that has any.

The challenge for the brothers is that they had been treated harshly by Joseph on their first trip, accused of being spies, and asked to prove their innocence by bringing Benjamin back with them on their return. Joseph knew who they were but they had no idea who he was. The bind these brothers find themselves in, is that their food had run out back in Canaan. Jacob, their father instructs them to go down to Egypt and buy more. They know they can’t show up there without Benjamin, but Jacob is adamant that he cannot go.

So we come to the focal point for our story today: Judah says, “Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die.... I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him” (Genesis 43:8-9).

As the story unfolds, that commitment is tested in ways that Judah surely couldn’t have predicted. Joseph invites them to a feast, with them as the honored guests. Benjamin is given much more of the fine food than everyone else. When they leave, thinking they’d made it safely through these curious events, they are stopped by guards who accuse them of stealing a silver cup from Joseph’s household. That cup is discovered in Benjamin’s sack, and the sentence given is that Benjamin must be thrown into prison.

This leads Judah, for the second time, to stand up and take responsibility. We heard his heartfelt and humble plea to Joseph during which he explained the whole situation with their father and his commitment to his father to ensure Benjamin’s safety. He concludes, “Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers. For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me?” (Genesis 44:33-34).

As we’ve seen before with other stories, this story is highly symbolic. Not only is Judah an example of someone who steps up in a noble way, he represents a part in us that takes responsibility. But it’s not just him. We do well to consider the famine, Joseph, Benjamin, Jacob,

and the others as representative parts of us, presenting a rich dynamic in terms of taking responsibility for our spiritual lives.

The goal, in terms of spiritual life, is to be a person of integrity—someone who lives as the Lord wants us to live, or responds to the many situations that come before us in a principled and helpful way. Today we are thinking of that in terms of taking responsibility, or “owning” our part in the equation. What does the Lord ask me to do, and am I willing to do it?

We know from experience that there’s quite a lot going on within us in any given situation that impacts whether we are successful at standing up and taking responsibility, or not. In spiritual terms, we see the dynamic within us unfolding as if in a pageant in this interaction of brothers. There is a part of us that wants to do the right thing—to lead a principled life, or to be a person of integrity. That’s Joseph—the part of us that dreams of being a better person (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5794). The Lord has, for each of us, been working to make that part more and more dominant. Hopefully there are manifestations in your life where Joseph is in charge—the intention to do the right thing, a commitment to the Lord’s way.

We know, though, that there are things that stand in the way. There is a natural part of us, symbolized in general by the brothers (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5775). That natural part of us isn’t bad per se, but if it leads the show, or becomes dominant, it gets us into big trouble. The brothers acted selfishly, from envy and hatred. So we can be ruthless or harsh to those who don’t do as we want, and we can be lured off the path of integrity by all sorts of natural concerns or desires. Spiritual life is a process of taming that natural part of ourselves, or bringing it into order by means of our spiritual part. Joseph’s brothers are in the process of bowing down to their younger brothers. Joseph’s dreams are coming true (see Genesis 37).

In order for that to happen, good intentions or motivations need to find their way into our words and deeds. There needs to be a link between the internal, spiritual part, and the external, natural part. In our story for today, the two things absolutely necessary for that to happen are represented by Judah and Benjamin. Judah means the good of the Church in the natural (*Arcana Caelestia* 5794). That’s the goal: good things actually done in our natural lives. That’s taking responsibility—the part of us that says “I will do as the Lord wants me to do.” Benjamin is the connector—an “intermediary” or a “link” between what is internal and what is external (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5600). For an internal motivation to be expressed in the words and actions of our lives there needs to be a catalyst. That’s Benjamin. He represents follow-through in our lives. Just as he’s the link between Joseph and his brothers, so what he represents is a link between the part of us that *wants* to be a good person and the part of us that actually *is* a good person. There must be a “Joseph” within us—spiritual motivation. There must be a “Judah” within us—a willingness to stand up and take responsibility for our actions and words. There must be a “Benjamin” within us—a willingness to translate spiritual desire into tangible action.

Judah, Jacob, and Benjamin. Let’s look at two parts of the story for today, to see how this all works, and tie it to specific examples. The first part deals with the interaction between Judah and Jacob, his father, over Benjamin. We know that Jacob was resistant. What’s that all about?

It’s about the part of us that does not want to change, that fears that any new course of action will lead to a worse state than the one we’re in. We heard some telling teachings about this dynamic earlier in the service. They talked about the general need for our natural parts to submit to our spiritual parts (*Arcana Caelestia* 5651). The goal is to allow spiritual principles and

influences, fed by the Lord to “give color to everything we think, will, or do” (*Arcana Caelestia* 5639). But there’s another part of us that simply doesn’t want that to happen. When our thinking is tied more to our natural or habitual ways of acting, we can become resistant, even without consciously thinking about it (see *Arcana Caelestia* 5650).

What does that look like? “I don’t want to be understanding in this moment.” “I don’t want to forgive, or be gentle.” “If I don’t bend the rules I’ll never get ahead.” “I don’t want to contribute to those less fortunate than myself.” “I don’t want to live by that teaching, but I’ll live according to all these other ones.” Underlying these general examples is a knowledge of what we’re supposed to do, yet a resistance to following through.

That’s where we need a spiritual “Judah.” Judah again is good in the natural. It’s the part of us that *does* want to speak and act as the Lord instructs. It’s the part of us that wants to take responsibility for our choices, and says, as we began with, “It’s my fault, and I take full responsibility for it.” “I will take that on; you can count on me.” “I will live up to my commitments.” “I will do as the Lord commands.” This sentiment is reflected in the rest of the teaching we just heard:

But when some light flows from the Lord through heaven into the natural part, we start to think differently. That is to say, we now prefer the spiritual part to have dominion... And when we consider that all the angels in the whole of heaven are like this and as a consequence experience joy defying description, we go to war with the natural part and at length wish to make the same subject to the spiritual. (*Ibid.*)

That’s the Judah part of us that is willing to take responsibility for our spiritual lives, and to work on actually being the good person in some new area of our lives.

Judah, Joseph, and Benjamin. So Jacob allowed Benjamin to go with Judah and his brothers to Egypt. They came before Joseph, who longed to be reunited with his brother. He gave them a feast, something entirely unexpected and unsettling to them. We learn later that it was part of his ruse to get Benjamin to stay in Egypt, because of the silver cup from that feast that was planted in his sack. After the pursuit and discovery of this “theft,” the brothers found themselves once again before Joseph, and once again in terrible circumstances.

This brings us to the second time Judah stood up on behalf of Benjamin. This is the part where he levels with Joseph and explains the whole situation to him. We see a humble, vulnerable, pleading Judah. It’s heart-breaking in its own way, and it is the catalyst for Joseph to finally reveal himself to his brothers.

Two things are worthy of note: First, Benjamin is in a tug-of-war. Joseph wants to keep him, and Judah really needs to bring him back. He is, again, the link. It’s vital that Joseph is attached to him, and it’s essential that he actually go back to Israel. In spiritual terms Benjamin is what drags the spiritual down into the natural. A person who successfully tells the truth instead of a lie, who fesses up to a bad decision and takes on the consequences, who apologizes with genuine desire to make it right, who stops spending frivolously in ways that are hurting the family’s financial security, who turns away instead of leers, who goes the extra mile, who stops to consider before assuming the worst of others, who courageously says within himself or herself, “No, not this time!”—is taking responsibility for letting the spiritual part reign over the natural part. Joseph wants Benjamin, and Judah wants Benjamin. And both in the end get to have him with them.

A second thing to note is the feeling of risk at such times. It is hard for us to recognize a failing and to own up to it. It takes courage to make the first move in a strained relationship by talking responsibility for our part and saying sorry. What if it's not reciprocated? What if that other person thinks poorly of us? We're letting people see through the veneer of our carefully crafted public persona, into the real us that's working on things, and sincerely trying to get it right. That's not always easy. It takes courage; it is risky; it makes us vulnerable.

But what else could Judah do? He had reached the point of no return. There was no other choice for him but to make his heartfelt appeal to Joseph. So too, we can come to a point in our lives where the cost of doing things the old way is simply too great. We have to take responsibility for necessary changes, and for doing things the Lord's way, because our old ways just cause too much harm.

That's where the Lord seeks to bring us, by means of our story for today. He calls us to take responsibility, to stand up and fight for the good part of us to win. He wants us to see for ourselves the value of doing things His way, and then to freely choose that way. He supplies within us everything that we need: Joseph or internal motivation; grain or spiritual sustenance; Jacob and his sons or knowledge of what works and doesn't; Judah, the part that is willing to take responsibility for what comes out of our mouths and what we do with our bodies; and Benjamin, the part of us that follows through.

So what part of your spiritual life will you take responsibility for today and in the coming week? To what extent are you willing to make yourself vulnerable by humbly trying to make a change? What negative part of yourself will you "got to war with" in an attempt to bring it into a more orderly state? What reflections will you bring forward from today's message that will help you stand up and do the right thing more often?

Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die.... I myself will be surety for him; from my hand you shall require him." (Genesis 43:8-9) **Amen.**

Readings from the Lord's Word: Genesis 43, 44 (parts); *Arcana Caelestia* 5609, 5639, 5651, 5842.

Genesis 43

⁸Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the lad with me, and we will arise and go, that we may live and not die, both we and you and also our little ones. ⁹I 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. ¹⁰For if we had not lingered, surely by now we would have returned this second time."

Genesis 44

¹⁸Then Judah came near to [Joseph] and said: "O my lord, please let your servant speak a word in my lord's hearing, and do not let your anger burn against your servant; for you are even like Pharaoh. ¹⁹My lord asked his servants, saying, 'Have you a father or a brother?' ²⁰And we said to my lord, 'We have a father, an old man, and a child of his old age, who is young; his brother is dead, and he alone is left of his mother's children, and his father loves him.' ²¹Then

you said to your servants, 'Bring him down to me, that I may set my eyes on him.'²² And we said to my lord, 'The lad cannot leave his father, for if he should leave his father, his father would die.'²³ But you said to your servants, 'Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you shall see my face no more.'

²⁴"So it was, when we went up to your servant my father, that we told him the words of my lord. ...²⁷ Then your servant my father said to us, 'You know that my wife bore me two sons;²⁸ and the one went out from me, and I said, "Surely he is torn to pieces"; and I have not seen him since.²⁹ But if you take this one also from me, and calamity befalls him, you shall bring down my gray hair with sorrow to the grave.'

³⁰"Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life,³¹ it will happen, when he sees that the lad is not with us, that he will die. So your servants will bring down the gray hair of your servant our father with sorrow to the grave.³² For your servant became surety for the lad to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I shall bear the blame before my father forever.'³³ Now therefore, please let your servant remain instead of the lad as a slave to my lord, and let the lad go up with his brothers.³⁴ For how shall I go up to my father if the lad is not with me, lest perhaps I see the evil that would come upon my father?"

Arcana Caelestia 5609

'Being surety for someone' means being responsible for that person, as is also evident from what immediately follows, especially from what Judah told Joseph regarding his being surety [for Benjamin].

Arcana Caelestia 5639

Essentially the spiritual existing with people is their actual affection for what is good and true, loved for its own sake and not for any selfish reason.... When [what is spiritual] reigns in people it influences and so to speak gives color to everything they think, will, or do.... In short, the spiritual consists in an affection stirred by charity and faith, that is, an affection for what is good and true, and in the delight and pleasure, and even more so in the blessedness and bliss that flow from them, which are feelings residing with people inwardly and making them truly Christian.

Arcana Caelestia 5651

Regeneration consists in nothing else than the natural being made subservient and the spiritual becoming its lord; and the natural is made subservient when it is made to correspond to the spiritual. Once the natural is made to correspond it is no longer reactionary but acts as it is commanded, answering the beck and call of the spiritual, almost as the actions of the body are answers to the beck and call of the will, or as speech and facial expressions conform to the thought flowing into them. From this it is evident that for people to become spiritual, their natural must come to be, so far as their power of will is concerned, of no worth whatsoever.

Arcana Caelestia 5842

'And now, I beg you, let your servant stay instead of the boy, a slave to my lord' means submission.