

Randall D Koehler

Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Genesis 9:1-17

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Deep Relationship

Hutterthal Mennonite Church, good morning! And good morning to all of you who join us online from your homes. We worship in limited forms this morning, but we earnestly await a soon-coming time when normalcy returns. Let us pray: God of this universe, you are not far off or distant. You are here among us in the midst of us, joining us in each moment. You desire and initiate relationship with each one of us, drawing us deeply into your love and mercy. Guide is in the way of your son, Jesus, in his deep and true teachings. We realize in the scriptures that your desire for relationship extends beyond human beings to all of creation, for you are in the process even now of making all things right, of healing the brokenness all around us and in us. Give us the strength to join you in this renewal and redemption as we care for ourselves, our neighbors, our enemies, and your good creation. We pray all of this in the name of Jesus, our Lord and King. Amen.

Deep and True! As I was preparing for this Lenten season, I came across a statement from the folks at Mennomedia in their *Leader* publication. They wrote about how this new season might be a time to grieve all of the things and people that we have lost over the past year with COVID, especially our very different Sunday services. But they also saw this Lenten season as an opportunity for renewed questioning, reflection, and discussion of “what we have discovered to be the deepest and truest parts of our lives and our journeys with God” (*Leader* – winter 2020-21, p. 36). I immediately began brainstorming those things in our lives, our world,

and our faith that are deep and true. In the past year, what you realized to be deep and true in your own life or your family life? In Genesis chapter 9, we find the creator of the universe, deeply and truly concerned about relationship and how relationship could change the world.

Before we get too much into chapter 9, we must know first about Noah and the ark, or more appropriately about Noah, God, and the great flood. God warns Noah in chapter 6 that the evil of humans has increased to the point that the earth needs a full restart, a flood. “Their only intent was evil,” writes the author in Genesis 6:6. God tells Noah to build an ark, or a massive boat, which will carry them through the waters. In Genesis 1 God ordered our world by containing or restricting the chaotic power of water. When God warns Noah, God is sorry for what humans have done to themselves and the world, so God allows the chaotic power of water to wash the world clean. Like in baptism, water symbolically washes us clean, so the flood washes across the world and wipes away the sorry state of humanity and the creatures of the land. Before the water is unleashed, Noah builds the boat and puts his family and the animals that God had told him on the boat.

I am not certain how the evil of that time was different or greater than our own, in that God was grieved enough to start over. Not to mention, this story is very early in the biblical narrative, leading me to ask how God could have given up on a project that had seemed to have only just begun. I wonder also what God has really accomplished when we find out soon after the flood that Noah’s sons are just as broken and corrupted as those who had died in the flood. Have you ever wondered these same things when reading these stories in Genesis?

Soon the waters abate and the ark comes to rest among the mountains of Ararat or the mountainous area of the ancient kingdom of Ararat. If taken literally, this place where Noah and his family land could possibly be a mountainous area near the intersection of Iran, Iraq, and

Turkey today, far to the north and east of modern-day Israel. In gratitude for God's warnings and insight, Noah builds an altar and sacrifices some of the animals that were saved to God.

God then speaks in chapter 9. Very different than our Isaiah text two weeks ago, God speaks for most of our 17-verse passage. We get the feeling in this story that God is creating again, but God's words lack the optimism of Genesis 1. In these first 7 verses, we hear God's desire for humans to experience deep and true relationship with God, with creation, and with each other. Something has drastically changed in the universe since Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden. One enormously important detail is this: God initiates the relationship; God seeks out Noah as he did before the flood; God does not completely give up on this universe because humans, in their great capacity for evil have brought it to its knees. God does not walk away, nor does God wash his hands of it. God does not give up even when we push him away, when we spit in his face, or when we blatantly disobey. God longs for deep and true relationship with each one of us.

God created us in his image so that we could experience relationship on several levels. Deep and true relationship with our creator, with our fellow image-bearing humans, and with God's good creation. But we know deeply also that all of these levels of relationship have been altered or even broken entirely since Adam and Eve, which is what led to the flood in the first place. God begins again in Genesis 9, giving humans his blessing in filling the earth again as in Genesis 1, but we notice an additional freedom and an important limitation to this second creation project. After the flood, this second first family, Noah's family, can kill animals and eat them alongside the plants and fruits that God originally allowed. According to Genesis 1, it seems that God's original intent was for us all to be vegetarian, but the flood, in some sense, restarts the human experiment. The animals that Adam had named in Genesis 2, are to live in

fear and dread of him. The only limitation on the people's diet is that they cannot eat the blood with the meat, a foreshadowing of the sacrificial system. The blood must be drained and return to the soil, to the dust that had been used by God originally to build living creatures.

We find a second limitation in God's first speech, but not on humans diets. This new limitation reflects how sin has corrupted our relationships with our neighbors. Since Cain and Abel in Genesis 4, violence and vengeance, as exemplified in the murder of Abel by his own brother, have stained God's image-bearers. However much evil and violence has been eliminated by the flood, God knows that limits must be put on people's violent tendencies. What we read in Genesis 9:5-6 is a foreshadowing of what will be codified or instituted in Israel's law on Mount Sinai. An eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth; a life for another life; no more, no less. You do not get to wipe out another person's family because he or she murdered one of your own. God will require a reckoning for human blood spilt on the ground as God did for the blood of Abel that Cain shed. Why? Genesis 9:6 repeats Genesis 1:26-27; all humans are created in God's image. Each one of us is valuable and worthy of love and care and mercy and grace and forgiveness and life because we bear God's image in the midst of God's good creation. To end this first half of our passage, God repeats his blessing of fertility for this new family in verse 7.

But the most important parts of our passage are not just about rules or eating meat. We remember that God initiated this human project in the first place. God created our universe, and God saved Noah from the chaotic and destructive power of the water. God brings the first covenant into the biblical story in the second half of our passage this morning. We must notice that this covenant is not only between God and humans. This first covenant or formal relationship with the Creator is between God and all of creation, including humans. God has given us the responsibility of caring for his good creation, which includes the largest mammals

and the smallest insects. How we use the land and the water and the animals and the space is just as much a reflection of our relationship with God as our actions toward our neighbor. God promises in this first covenant that no matter what happens from this point on, God will not allow water to wipe out life on earth. As a reminder to himself and to all of creation, God places the rainbow in the sky.

I am colorblind. My first time at the optometrist when I was young was interesting because he gave me a book of random collections of colored dots. He then asked me if I could see any patterns in the dots. I had no idea what he was talking about. Supposedly there's numbers or letters, but I've never seen them. So growing up, I do not remember seeing many rainbows. It was not until I was older, maybe high school or college, that I noticed one streak of a rainbow if the color was different enough from the sky around it. Today, sometimes I notice them and sometimes I don't. In those moments that I do notice, I think about Noah. I think about how human brokenness has caused much pain and suffering to ourselves, to creation, and to God.

What is even more interesting about Genesis 9 is that the Hebrew text does not say anything about a rainbow in the way that we know rainbows. The word that we infer to be rainbow is just "bow," a tool used to kill animals or a weapon of the past used by ancient armies. In Genesis 9, it is as if God, the Almighty, sets down his weapon of destruction and death in the clouds, never to pick it up again. God promises that as long as the bow is in the clouds and not in his hands, a flood will never again overcome the earth. As I thought more about this moment in Genesis 9:13, I wondered if God realized how futile the idea of divine vengeance or violence is as a deterrent to human sin and brokenness. Hence, God knows right away that a different way has to be instituted in this second attempt. Even though nearly every person is gone, humanity's propensity toward sin and death have not been eliminated. I wonder also if this is God's

reminder to all of us that punishment is not the best deterrent for bad behavior, a claim that psychologists have made for many years.

And yet, I still think about the rainy seasons that we sometimes have, in which water washes crops away or prevents planting seed. We are still dependent on God even with our very best farming equipment for the sunshine and the rain that we need. Even though God has given us the responsibility of stewardship over creation, we still realize that much of what we are stewarding is out of our control, and we return to God's deep relationship with all of creation.

We return to our focus this morning that God's original intent has been for deep and true relationship with all of creation: between God and humans, between humans and other humans, and between humans and creation. God's first covenant highlights how deep and true relationship has the potential to transform us and all of creation. We see the rainbow and we remember God's promises. These promises in Genesis will one day be fulfilled in God becoming human in Jesus and truly overcoming our brokenness and sin in his life, death, and resurrection. Rather than a flood of water causing massive destruction and death in its attempt to wipe away sin, God brings a flood of love and compassion to all of creation through Jesus. Through Jesus, God shows that he will go to any length to never let us go as he promised with the rainbow. We plunge into the depths of relationship with God when we answer his call, saying yes to his invitation to be his image-bearers as we were originally created to be. We stand on God's promises and the identity that God has given us. We seek out relationship with God, relationship with our neighbors and our enemies, and relationship with creation. We seek to reflect God's love and care for creation as we remember it in the rainbow. Finally, we draw others into deeper relationships as God has drawn us into transformative hope and peace.

Let us pray: Creator and Sustainer of our world, we thank you that you do not break your promises, that you sought us out and called us from our brokenness and sin to reflect who you are to the rest of creation. We ask for your forgiveness as we know that our sins have affected more than just us or you. Forgive us for the ways that we have exploited and destroyed your world, not treating it with the respect and care that you have charged us with. Give us the guidance and the creativity to walk in deeper relationship with you, each other, and creation, so that we can become more accurate reflections of who you are in this world. In Jesus's name. Amen

Benediction:

God calls us to move beyond the shallows of our lives into deep and true relationship. God requires our trust and vulnerability as we reach out to a neighbor, bursting the surface bubbles of our lives and striving for deeper understanding. Go into the week before you, reaching out in love for a story and relationship far beyond your own. Amen.