

I was in Hampton, Virginia last week, with Baptists, who were so kind and thoughtful that I can no longer make jokes about Baptists. It's always so annoying to have your prejudices proven wrong. You thought you had the world figured out, had everyone in neat little categories, then discover you were wrong. Oh, well, back to the drawing board. One more myth demolished.

Hampton, Virginia was founded in 1607. It is the oldest continuously-inhabited, English-speaking town in America. St. Augustine, Florida is older, but you'll remember from your history classes that they spoke Spanish there. So my hosts were taking me on a tour of Hampton and I asked if they could show me the oldest houses in Hampton, and they grew rather quiet, then said the old houses were gone. Gone? How all the old houses just disappear, I asked. And they told me a story I had never heard, that on August 7, 1861, Confederate soldiers and townspeople, fearing their homes, churches, and businesses might fall into the hands of northern soldiers and runaway slaves, burned their entire town to the ground. Over 500 structures. All that was left standing was the burnt brick shell of St. John's Church, which remains the only surviving Colonial structure in Hampton. Nothing else endured. It's like those awful stories we read about in the newspaper where a man tells a woman, "I love you so much. But if I can't have you, no one can," and shoots her dead. Except this time, it was an entire town pulling the trigger.

One of the people buried in St. John's cemetery is a man named James Darling, a Northerner, who arrived in Hampton from New York City in 1866, just after the Civil War, and seeing the ruins of the city and the poverty and hunger, vowed to rebuild the city, and did, and so this Northerner became an unexpected savior of this Southern city.

Have you ever thought about our human tendency towards self-destruction? And how often, after we have destroyed ourselves, our salvation comes from unexpected quarters, forcing us to reconsider our prejudices?

I'm reminded of the story of Joseph in the Bible, who rose into leadership via a curious series of events that began when his brothers sold him into slavery because he was a twerp. He was his father's favorite, who gave him a brilliant coat, and instead of being humble about it, he wore it everywhere and said to his brothers, "Look at my coat. Dad gave it to me. He loves me most of all." And he had dreams of his brothers bowing down to him, and like an idiot he told them about his dreams, so one day they did the perfectly understandable thing and sold him to some Egyptians traveling through town, then told their Dad he'd been murdered. I'm leaving out some of the details, but that's the gist of it. Joseph ends up in jail, falsely accused, where he impresses the warden and the head of the Pharaoh's guard, and eventually becomes the number two man in all of Egypt, right behind the Pharaoh. Kind of like the vice-president of Egypt.

Meanwhile, over in Israel, a famine occurs and Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt for food and grain. Unaware of Joseph's ascent to power, they fail to recognize him when they see him. But he recognizes them and being a twerp, plays some mind games with them, then has a change of heart, becomes less of a twerp, gives them food and grain, and the family is re-united and saved. Saved by the very brother they had once despised. Do you notice a recurring theme, that often, after our lives have gone up in flames, we are saved by someone we once despised.

I tell my sons, don't ever burn a bridge. If you must leave a relationship or job, if you absolutely must, do it as graciously as you can. Because some people will remember that you were less than kind, and you don't want that kind of baggage following you around the rest of your life.

I remember when my dad was on the town board in Danville and hired people to work at the park. This was back in the days when a summer job at the park would pay for your next year's college. There was a guy in our school who had bullied me and he applied for a job at the park. Dad always used to ask me, "What do you know about so-and-so? Is he a good guy? Is she a good person?" So this guy applied for a job and dropped his application off at our house. I was the only one home. He handed me his application and said, "I hope you'll put in a good word for me with your dad."

And I thought, *payback*. So Dad asked me what he was like and I said, “He’s bad news. Don’t hire him.” And I was so happy, and so pleased with myself. Every time I saw him, I’d think to myself, “I got you, buddy. That’ll teach you to mess with me.”

That is precisely why I would be so horrible in elective office. I’d spend all my time getting even with people. *An IRS audit for you, a parking ticket for you, higher property taxes for you. Mess with me in the third grade, I’ll get you.*

Thirty years later, the bully’s mom died, so his sister, there were just the two kids, asked if I could conduct the funeral. I said sure. I didn’t know the mom, so I asked her to tell me about their mother and she said, “Mom wasn’t a nice person. There’s nothing much to say.” I thought *Huh, maybe that’s why he was a bully*. But I still didn’t like him. So I went to the funeral home, I hadn’t seen the guy since high school, but there he was with his daughter, who had Down’s Syndrome. I’d never known that about him. I was watching him with her and was moved by his kindness and patience. I got to thinking about what his life might have been like if I’d been a better person when Dad asked me about him, how maybe he’d gotten the job, and saved his money and went to college and had more resources to care for his daughter. The thing is, it never occurred to me until the funeral, that instead of being a twerp, I could have helped someone.

We never know who we might be called to save, or who, in the midst of our suffering and pain, might be called to save us. Probably someone we don't expect. So this is a cautionary tale. Don't be like me. Be like James Darling, who saved Hampton. Be like Joseph, who overcame his twerpness and saved his family.

Because one day you'll torch your home or your bridge. Metaphorically speaking. You'll do something that leaves you vulnerable, in desperate need of help. When that happens, just remember, you don't get to pick who will save you. That's up to God, and I think this might be the most fun God has, bringing these broken, bitter lovers together again.

When the people of Hampton burned their city to deny it to the North, God sent a Northerner to save them.

When Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, it was Joseph who saved them from starvation.

Who will save you? And who will you save?

Be prepared to be surprised.