

11th Sunday after Pentecost

“O Brother, Where Art Thou?”

20 August 2017—Salado UMC

Preaching Text: Genesis 45:1-15

“There is no revenge so complete as forgiveness”

Josh Billings (1818 - 1885)

Genesis 45:1-15 reminds me of something noted Georgian writer Flannery O'Connor once wrote: “A story is a way to say something that can't be said any other way . . . You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate.” We also note that we are skipping a great deal of the Joseph story in Genesis. For example, details that include the story of Joseph and Mrs. Potiphar, Joseph in prison and his dreams there, and how Joseph is incorporated into Pharaoh's house.

Joseph comes to power in Egypt as there is a world-wide famine. Jacob (Israel) sends his ten sons to purchase grain, yet keeps Benjamin home. As the brothers try to buy grain, Egyptian officials accuse them of spying. As a pledge that they will return with Benjamin, the brothers leave Simeon behind. Losing Benjamin would no doubt break Jacob's heart, but he agrees to let the youngest brother make an Egyptian trip. After departing for home with grain, Joseph has the brothers detained for stealing. He puts his silver cup in Benjamin's baggage and makes Benjamin appear a thief. Judah begs for Benjamin's release, because he brothers fear for their father's life if the youngest, Benjamin, fails to return home. It is here that today's story begins:

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. 3 Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. 5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. 7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. 8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler overall the land of Egypt. 9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. 10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. 11 I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’

And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother

Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him (Genesis 45:1-15).

Notice the story's end. Joseph dismisses all except his eleven brothers and identifies himself. He then announces that God has worked through them. By selling him into slavery, he says, "God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph's management of Egypt's grain supplies keeps Israel alive despite the famine. Joseph even forgives his brothers. Yet, if we did not know this story, then we might expect a different end.

The high points of the story, from the selling of Joseph to Joseph's revelation of his identity to his brothers in Egypt, occupy about six chapters in Genesis. The story begins in resentment but it ends in the preservation of God's people. God's mysterious hand is at work here and far greater than the actors' roles. God's promise lives on despite the characters involved. In due course, Joseph will say, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (Genesis 50:20). In other words, "Fear not! What you meant for evil, God meant for good." We know that Joseph has several characteristics that distinguish him. First, he is a dreamer—dreaming about sheaves and stars. Later Joseph interpreted dreams for Pharaoh—the world's most powerful ruler. Second, we know Joseph as a patriarch in line with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. As patriarch, Joseph also becomes a provider. Joseph feeds Egypt by means of strong leadership insights and management skills. In addition, he feeds his own people precluding the effects of a devastating famine.

But we know Joseph's true colors best in describing him as a brother who could have done better. His actions in Genesis' early chapters remind us that he strutted in his coat of many colors/coat with long sleeves. Joseph regularly tattled to daddy Jacob about his older brother's behavior. For these reasons and doubtless many others, Genesis as a whole story implicitly suggests what Genesis 37:8 explicitly tells us:

"His brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?' So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words."

Whether or not Joseph got his "just deserts" when he dodged being murdered by his brothers and was instead sold into slavery you must judge for yourself. But you must think that for many years revenge was on Joseph's mind. "Just wait until I can get even with my siblings," he thought—not the first or last little brother to have such thoughts! The concept of revenge is as old as history. Almost since the origin of the written word, humans have had the desire to exact vengeance on those who have wronged us. The Code of Hammurabi (ca. 1760 BCE)—is the oldest verified set of laws and is rooted firmly in a conviction of "an eye for an eye."

Here is an act of revenge you may relate to and perhaps approve of:

Alan Ralsky was fond of sending out junk and spam emails. When critics learned of his actual address, they gave him a dose of his own medicine by signing him up for junk mails. Ralsky ended up receiving hundreds of pounds of junk mail every day. Even worse for him, he got convicted to 51 months imprisonment for a stock manipulation scheme (top-10-best-revenge-stories-of-all-time).

Yet the story of Joseph and his brothers, with animosity from start to finish, has an unexpected ending—who would have thought Joseph to be this magnanimous? Forgiveness is the answer to much, if not most, of the anger we experience in life. Unresolved anger leads to bitterness, hostility, and revenge. Forgiveness leads to freedom and reconciliation. No character in the drama of the book of Genesis better illustrates the fundamentals of forgiveness than Joseph, and no chapter more clearly defines and describes the essentials of forgiveness than chapter 45.

Those years which Joseph spent in slavery and prison could have been the occasion for a slow burn that might have ignited into an explosion of anger at the sight of his brothers. How angry Joseph could have been with God for getting him into such a situation. But Joseph recognized that God was with him in his sufferings and that these sufferings were permitted from the loving hand of a sovereign God. Most of all, Joseph could have been angry with his brothers, who had callously sold him into slavery (thanks to Bob Deffinbaugh and his blog titled “*The Fundamentals of Forgiveness*,” 12 May 2004).

Perhaps we can appreciate Joseph as something of a model. Christians estranged from one another is a reality. Some congregations live in constant, internal conflict. Alienation in many racial and ethnic communities exists—as we see too clearly in Ferguson, MO and Charlottesville, NC. How can we, as Christians, be like Joseph, forgetting the past and attempting reconciliation? I do not want to wipe away the fact that Joseph’s brothers mistreated him. The effects of abuse can never be nonchalantly wiped away. When forgiveness is a possibility, then we may acknowledge it is part an open-eyed look at reality and also a miracle of God. If anyone challenges you about miracles, then tell them about the time that you forgave someone for a flagrant sin.

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