

“True Grace”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
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Genesis 45: 1-15

When I was in college, I saw for the first time *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. This is the musical written by Andrew Lloyd Webber which was introduced in the late 1970s and has been a phenomenal success ever since. I was a junior at Davidson, and was studying in Scotland for a semester. During my Spring Break, I traveled to London for three days. Friends from home had recommended that I try to see *Joseph*, so I bought a limited-view ticket which on a student’s budget was all I could afford. As a result, I was two rows from the stage, but couldn’t see the back-half of the stage because of the awkward angle!

However, that night, I didn’t need to see the whole stage. All I needed was to hear the music, and listen to the retelling of this familiar story in a fresh and exciting way. If you have seen this musical, or at least heard its music, then you know what I mean. The brothers cavort and act like a group of misfits; Pharaoh comes on the stage singing like another great king – Elvis Presley; and children join the cast to close with the show’s finale.

That semester in Britain was very important to me, because it is during that time that I truly felt I heard God’s call to be a minister. I can’t pinpoint one moment or place where that became crystal clear; rather, it was a combination of moments, people, and places in which I sensed God speaking. As I look back on that time in my life, I know that evening at *Joseph* was one of those moments. I heard in the music, the actors, the audience, the atmosphere – in all those things I heard God claiming me as his own child, and promising to be with me forever. That is the claim God made to the Israelites through Joseph, and that was the affirmation I heard once again.

Perhaps it is no wonder that Andrew Lloyd Webber chose this story from the Bible for his musical. It is full of good theater: drama, humor, tragedy, soul-searching, surprise, and reconciliation. But most importantly, it is a story of God and God’s doing. It is a reminder that in all things and for all things, God is acting to bring about good to the creation and to its creatures. Finally, it is an example of the power of forgiveness and true grace, a gift that comes with a great price, but ultimately reaps the greatest of rewards.

To understand the context of our story today, we need to remember the events that precede it. Joseph is one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and after making his brothers jealous with his dreams and father’s favor, they sell him into slavery, figuring he will die in bondage. Instead of death, Joseph interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and finds favor with the Egyptian King. As a member of Pharaoh’s court, he is the one who receives the sons of Jacob, who have come to beg for food and supplies in the midst of famine in Canaan.

Joseph pulls a trick on his brothers to test their sincerity, making it look like Benjamin has stolen his silver cup. When Judah pleads for Benjamin's life and promises to be Joseph's servant himself in exchange, that is when Joseph knows his brothers have repented and changed their ways.

Don't you think Joseph had at least the right, though, to be angry with his brothers? I mean, here are these guys who, if they weren't blood relatives, I would likely have considered bullies. Instead of putting up with his stories about dreams, they scheme to make it look like he had died, when in reality he was sold into a life which in many ways was worse than death. Now, in a complete reversal of fortune, here is Joseph standing with his scheming, conniving brothers at his mercy. Wouldn't it seem just if he were to tell them they were to be tried and penalized for their treatment of him?

That potential feeling of anger and retribution is extremely prevalent in our society. Whether it's on the roads, in our families, at our work, in our schools, anger can build up inside of us at such an alarming rate that if we don't try to release it, it explodes in uncontrollable ways. As Americans, we have such a problem with anger that it affects our health in more ways than we imagine. Asthma, arthritis, emotional disorders, high blood pressure can all be produced by high levels of anger in one's personality. You know this yourself: when you become angry at something or someone, you tense up, your heart starts to beat faster, you probably get a headache, and you simply don't physically feel better until you have resolved that anger in some way.

But notice what Joseph's physical reaction is when it simply becomes too much for him to stand anymore. He doesn't fly off in a rage, or scream at the top of his lungs at his brothers. Instead, he tells everyone else in the room to get out, and his sobbing and crying is so loud, even his attendants outside the door could hear him. That doesn't sound like someone who still has a great deal of anger in him. Rather, it is the persona of a man who long before this had forgiven these men for the terrible wrong they had committed against him.

And it is clearly a shock to his brothers. You will notice that none of the words spoken in today's passage come from them; they are all from Joseph's mouth, as his brothers were "dismayed at his presence" before them. They figured he would have them imprisoned for life, or at least made slaves themselves for the crime they had committed. But Joseph did not dwell on that, and instead had another point of view. "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (Gen. 45:5). Joseph has come to believe that it was God's doing all along that these events took place: being sold by his brothers so that in Egypt he might save them from the famine in Canaan. It is a profound statement, and one that goes against all kinds of logic. But at its heart is faith in a God who never forsook him in his most trying hour, and now has provided an opportunity for him to show grace to the very ones who had betrayed him.

In order to get to that point, Joseph had to forgive his brothers, and that couldn't have been an easy thing to do. If you think about it, at its core

to forgive is to release or set someone free. When I am forgiven a debt, that means I am released from the obligation to pay someone back what I borrowed. It is the same when you forgive someone who has committed a wrong against you: you release them from the guilt and anger toward themselves which they may feel.

What that means is if you forgive someone, it will actually hurt you. If I forgive someone of a debt they owe me, then I suffer by not getting the money I had anticipated eventually being paid. If I forgive you for committing a wrong, then I suffer the pain and guilt you would carry had I not forgiven you. This is the measure of true forgiveness. It is what Joseph offered to his family, for he truly reacted in a way that showed the emotion of his decision to forgive.

The same can be said of God. The forgiveness God offers us in Jesus Christ is overwhelming, for in sending his Son, God paid the price of losing his only Son, so we might have the benefit of everlasting life. There is no greater forgiveness than that, but it is what we are to strive for in our relationships with one another.

What does true grace look like in our world? When two individuals who have had a history of disagreements over many years decide to leave those entanglements behind, and work together in harmony toward a common goal. When a murder victim's family turns to the convicted and says, "I forgive you." When people decide it is time to live out the painful yet transformative grace God has shown them in their Savior, Jesus Christ.

What would true grace look like in our world? When instead of drawing lines in the sand over our differences, we reach out and embrace the one with whom we disagree with. When we do not join with the crowd in isolating the "strange" or "weird ones," but instead welcome them as Christ has welcomed us. When we are willing to risk some pain by exhibiting true grace, for in doing so we understand the depth of pain our God suffered to extend us grace and forgiveness.

Joseph and his brothers discovered that through all the ups and downs of life, God was never far away, eventually leading them to peace and prosperity. And through the grace Joseph extends to his family, God saves his people in more ways than one. May we not be afraid to embody a similar forgiveness in our daily lives, recognizing that through such acts of grace we are God's agents of change, bringing hope and wholeness to a broken and unsettled world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.