

Roots
The Forgiving Prince

It is a real shame that we can't take several weeks to slowly go through this whole story of Joseph, because it really is a fascinating story. And oftentimes, because of the fact that I am a little brother, it's a story that I resonate with quite a bit. When you are the younger brother, especially in Joseph's day and age, you are basically stuck. You don't make a name for yourself, rather you are always compared to those who have gone before. It is little wonder that the thought of him surpassing his brothers was merely a dream, for the truth is it would take a dreamer to really believe that it could happen.

And, I will admit that from a distance it certainly looks like a foolish and perhaps even arrogant thing for Joseph to have told his brothers and father this dream that he had. I mean how in the world did he think this would turn out, right? But again, if you're a younger sibling perhaps you get this a bit more. If you have a chance to show up your older sibling in some way or to mock them, well, you take that chance in spite of the fact that you might get hit or in trouble from your parents. The physical pain is totally worth the emotional triumph of outdoing those older than you.

Of course, my guess is that Joseph didn't realize the repercussions of his actions would be so great. And you wonder, don't you, what he was thinking about when he was down in that pit. "Maybe I should have only told them one of the two dreams about how they were worshipping me," or, "I knew I shouldn't have worn my nice coat today." But now it was too late. And before you know it, he's in a caravan headed off to Egypt to be sold as a slave. This was, of course, far from the dreams that he thought he had been given by God. And you can't help but wonder, "Did he start questioning the dream?" Did he start wondering whether the dreams had really come from God or whether they were just, well, dreams?

And then he gets sold to Potiphar, and Joseph, well, he starts working hard and before you know it he's moved up in the servant ranks and is head over Potiphar's household. Joseph had to be thinking, "The dream is alive again!" But, of course, after refusing the advances of Potiphar's wife, after doing what he knew was right (and not doing what he knew was wrong), he ends up in prison. And again, didn't he have to wonder whether the dreams had really come from God or whether they were just, well, dreams?

In prison, Joseph begins to move up the prison ladder, so to speak, and before you know it he is in charge of the other prisoners. Joseph had to be thinking, "Well, it's not exactly how I saw the dream unfolding, but hey, the dream must be alive again. Especially, of course, when he is able to decipher the dreams of the Pharaoh's

cupbearer and baker and he receives promise them that they won't forget to tell the Pharaoh about his false imprisonment. But then, of course, days turn into weeks, turn into months that turn into years and, we're told, the cupbearer forgets Joseph. And again, didn't Joseph have to wonder whether the dreams had really come from God or whether they were just, well, dreams?

But then, of course, Pharaoh has a dream and finally the cupbearer remembers Joseph. And so he interprets Pharaoh's dream and before you know it Joseph is second in command of Egypt, in charge of preparing for the famine. This time the dream seems to stick and Joseph is taking the lead as he thought he would, as he thought God had told him he would. And then to everyone's great surprise his brothers are back on the scene, which begins a back and forth process where Joseph gives to them, but then tricks them to see how they will react, gives to them, then tricks them to see how they will react. Perhaps Joseph was testing them or maybe he simply needed time to process the emotions and thoughts that must have been going through his mind. What must he have been thinking? For years he has dealt with the implications of what these brothers standing before him had done long before. Nearly killed, forced to be a servant, charged with something he hadn't done, thrown in jail, forgotten by those who shouldn't have forgotten him, separated from his father and his homeland. All for what? For having a dream they didn't like.

And so, after years of questions and anger and injustice and confusion and hopes and disappointments and loss Joseph does the only thing he can do, the only thing that he cannot help but do. He begins to cry. And not just cry, but sob in a way that spoke as no words or actions ever could. A cry that came from so deep within that it could not help but reach the ears of those who were far off. Until finally he spoke words to a group of men he probably thought he would never see again and asked a question he thought would never be answered. "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

And in the blink of an eye this room that had just been filled with the voluminous sounds of anguish and pain and perhaps even a glimpse of joy went absolutely silent. As one commentator put it, it is the worst thing the brothers could have heard, beyond what any of them could have imagined. Of course, as Genesis suggests, they were dismayed. Why wouldn't they be? Why shouldn't they be? If the wailing of this man had not caused them concern enough, the silence of the brother whom they had betrayed must have been almost unbearable. A silence broken with words that could not have brought comfort to any of them. "Come closer to me."

This was probably the last thing they wanted to do. From a distance they had options. They could choose to believe they had misheard them. They could refrain from looking at him closely and remembering even more clearly what they had done. They could more easily turn away and run from what they done, from the past, the present and the future. Being closer made them vulnerable; no more

hiding, no more running, no more disguises. Being close meant they would be either killed or embraced.

But Joseph knew that it was only in being close, only in facing what they had done and what had happened to him, that they would be able to move forward. That though it may not be comfortable it was necessary. As Mark Labberton has said, “hard conversations need to happen at close distances.” The way we are able to move forward when it comes to difficult conversations can come only when we are willing to look at each other in the eyes and see the pain, the stories, the vulnerability therein.

And so, the brothers move closer. I picture them shuffling as a group slowly inching nearer to their newly discovered brother. And with a refreshing, if not difficult honesty, Joseph tells them that he is their brother, yes, the one *they* sold into Egypt. But then, Joseph makes this fascinating turn because rather than displaying his anger or casting them into prison or screaming out, “How could you,” he tells them that God was the one who sent him to Egypt or as he will say again to them in a few chapters, “What they meant for evil, God intended for good.”

Now it would be easy at this point to think that Joseph isn’t really dealing with the issue, that he’s letting his brothers off the hook or acting like everything is great. But, as we’ve already talked about that’s clearly not the case. Joseph’s deep cries were a sign of the pain that he had endured because of his brothers and his clear recollection and statement to them that they had sold him to Egypt are signs, not of easily dismissing what they had done, but of being very clear about what they had done. No, what Joseph is doing is not denying that pain has been caused or that his brothers need to face that (and at a close distance), but that in spite of that pain and betrayal that God still works. And believing that, while difficult, changes our perspective in dramatic ways.

Just because Megan and I are married does not, of course, means that we like to go about things in the same manner. One of the first times I discovered this was when we were still dating and we decided to go the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago. I’d look at one aquarium and then move to the next one and the next one before looking back and seeing that Megan was still five aquariums back counting the number of gills on each fish.

The same things happen in museums as well. A few years ago we were in an art museum and there I was going from one art piece to the next before realizing that, sure enough, Megan was a couple centuries behind me. So, I walked back and there she was with her camera at a very close distance taking a picture of a piece of impressionist art. Then she would move back and take another picture and then back and took another one. I suggested in a very sweet way that perhaps it was time to see what else was there for fear that we might end up leaving this museum in a different century than when we arrived.

But later on she began to show me the pictures that she had taken. The first one, the one where she was really close, focused on a seemingly non-descript, blob of paint. Quite frankly, from this perspective, it could have been a blob made mistakenly by the brush falling off and hitting the canvas. But then in the next shot, this first seemingly non-descript blob that could have been a mistake was joined with other non-descript blobs that could have been mistakes, but instead of being just one big non-descript blob you could see that it was turning into something, even if you didn't know what that something was. And then the next picture was of these non-descript blobs that could have been mistakes joining up with even more non-descript blobs that could have been mistakes until it turned into a remarkably beautiful picture of a woman walking through an orchard on a sunny, spring day.

And in many ways I think this is the image that comes to mind when we think about the story of Joseph and his brothers. Throughout this story people have made their marks or as I would say it, their blobs of paint. Sometimes they were good blobs (the faithfulness of Joseph, the kindness of the jailer and pharaoh), but oftentimes it would seem like they are mistakes- the arrogance of Joseph, the selling of Joseph by the brothers, the lying of Potiphar's wife, the forgetfulness of the cup bearer. And those mistakes, to be sure, were painful and needed to be addressed, but they are also not irredeemable. Not because of who we are, but because of who God is. Joseph saw on this day that God had been there all along as the artist, looking at it from a distance and coordinating these blobs into the plan that he had all along. Never giving up on the painting, but always knowing that making something beautiful was always possible.

But sometimes, in the middle of the painting, it is hard for us to see it. It is difficult for us to not focus on the blobs, on the mistakes, on how we have been hurt by others, and trust that in spite of that God might still be working. And one of the only ways, it seems to me, for us to be able to step back from the blobs and start moving forward, as Joseph was able to do, is when we are able to practice the oftentimes difficult art of forgiveness.

Now forgiveness does not mean that we avoid thinking about those mistakes or that we quickly just move on like nothing happened. It doesn't even always mean that every relationship will be reconciled. But it does mean that we all have decisions to make in our lives about whether we will forgive. And that decision, which can take days months or even years, will affect, make no mistake about it, whether we can move forward and whether or not we can truly trust that somehow God can continue to work in our lives despite the difficulties we have had to endure.

I have wondered this week what Joseph's life would have looked like had he decided to simply be angry at his brothers instead of moving forward and working hard for Potiphar and his family? What would Joseph's life had looked like had he been unable to forgive Potiphar's wife and decide to focus on that, rather than believing that God was not yet done with him. Or what if he had said, "You know what, the last time I interpreted someone's dream nothing good happened, so why should I

interpret your dream, Pharaoh. I shouldn't even be here!" But at each painful step, at each blob of paint, Joseph had to learn to trust God that even though he didn't know how this painting would end up, that God could use even these most difficult of times. I believe Joseph each time had to decide to forgive, so that he could move forward into the plan God continued to have for his life.

And as we thought about this story for this week, the worship team decided that we wanted to do more than just think about areas in our lives where we have not been able to forgive and have perhaps grown stuck in the painting of our lives. That what might be helpful is for us to intentionally write down an area where we still struggle with forgiving someone for what they have done or what they have not done. It could even be an area where you are continuing to be angry at God for what he allowed to happen and you find yourself unable to move forward in your faith journey, unable to trust him. Whatever it is, I want to take a couple minutes now and I invite you to write something down as a way of being honest with yourself and with God and perhaps as a way of saying, "I'm willing to believe and trust you God to take this pain and to shape it into the larger picture you have for my life. Let's do that now.