

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, August 27, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 45:1-15

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Joseph Reveals Himself to His Brothers (Reconcile)

[prayer]

Our story begins and ends in weeping.

For some twenty odd years Joseph wept in private over the great wrong done to him by his brothers. He suffered greatly after he was sold into slavery in Egypt because of their jealousy, even spending time in prison. But eventually the prophetic gift that incited his brothers to throw him into a pit elevated him to Pharaoh's right hand. Joseph predicted a great famine and engineered a way through the disaster, and in gratitude Pharaoh made him governor of Egypt.

Which is how years later he finds himself face to face with all ten of his estranged brothers. The famine had spread to Canaan, and they came to Egypt seeking bread. They did not recognize their little brother, all grown up and dressed in Egypt's power. But Joseph recognized them. That old wound of betrayal reopened, seeping revenge. Joseph decided to keep his identity hidden and use the power of his office against his brothers. He accused them of spying, and when they protested that they were honest men, with a father and younger brother back home, Joseph demanded they prove it by bringing the boy to him (v. 16). He then took Simeon hostage as surety. As they turned to leave, Reuben lamented to his brothers: "Didn't I tell you, 'Don't do anything wrong to Joseph?' But you wouldn't listen. And now this is payback for his death'" (v. 22). All those years the brothers had lived in the shadow of their sin, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The younger brother in question was Benjamin, Jacob's only other child with his beloved Rachel. Rachel died giving birth to him, and so old Jacob was understandably very attached to Benjamin and distraught at the thought of sending him to Egypt. "You've taken my children from me!" he spat at his sons. "Joseph's gone. Simeon's gone. And now you are taking Benjamin." (v. 36) But

truthfully, he had little choice; his family was starving before his eyes. So, he sent Benjamin to Egypt with assurances from the oldest brother, Judah, that if anything happened, Jacob could hold Judah responsible.

Joseph was so moved by the sight of Benjamin that he had to step out of the room to compose himself. But he still could not trust his brothers. So, he devised a test to see if they had changed at all over the years. He snuck a silver cup into Benjamin's sack of grain, setting him up to look like a thief. When the cup was discovered, Joseph demanded Benjamin remain in Egypt as his slave.

The brothers responded in grief: They tore their clothing and fell to the ground before Joseph, pleading for Benjamin's life. Judah, certain that his father would die if Benjamin did not come home, offered to take Benjamin's place. He confessed to Joseph the great sin he and his brothers had committed years before and the deep pain it caused Jacob. "Please," Judah pleaded. "Let your servant stay as your slave instead of the young man. How can I go back to my father without him? I couldn't bear to see how badly my father would be hurt" (Gen 44:33-34).

It was a startling offer and the proof that Joseph had been seeking – that these men, who once sold their brother into slavery, would rather suffer enslavement themselves than commit that sin again.

[pause]

Sin is the actions and behaviors that keep us from loving God, loving our neighbors, and loving ourselves. When we speak of confessing our sin, we mean a threefold process of admission: We admit to ourselves, we admit to each other, and we admit to God that we have done something wrong. This order is important. We cannot confess our wrongdoing without first acknowledging inside ourselves that we have sinned. Confession must begin in our own hearts. And what we are acknowledging is that we have sinned against the image of God – the image inside ourselves and, if our sin extends to our neighbor, the image of God inside them as well.

Before Joseph's brothers could confess to him what they had done, they had to acknowledge it first among themselves. I do not know how long this work of self-awareness took. I hope Jacob's immediate anguish at the loss of Joseph was

enough to turn his sons' hearts in remorse. But our hearts are frequently stubborn, even when confronted with another person's pain, so perhaps it took them much longer. In any case, when they arrive at Joseph's doorstep, it appears they have undergone the inner transformation necessary for the work of reconciliation to take place. They understood the terrible crime they had committed against their brother Joseph and the terrible pain they had caused their father. Judah had no excuses to offer.

Still, we cannot confess to only ourselves. For one, true reconciliation requires accountability for our behavior. For another, the burden of keeping our wrongdoing secret can eat us alive. The brothers had not confessed to Jacob the true details of Joseph's disappearance; they kept that secret for decades. So, Judah's confession to Joseph was the first time he told another person about what they had done. The irony is that he did not know he was confessing to the very person he hurt.

But Joseph was not simply seeking a confession. He wanted proof that his brothers were penitent. Penitence is showing sorrow and regret for what we have done. This is the next step beyond confession and the emotional impetus for repentance. First you acknowledge your wrongdoing. Then you feel sorrow for your wrongdoing – not sorrow for yourself, but sorrow for the pain you have caused the other person. And *then* – this is critical – you commit to not doing that wrong again. The ancient Hebrews called this *teshuva*. The root word, *shuv*, means to turn around. The Hebrew Bible is littered with this word *shuv* as God commands His people to turn around, to turn away from their wrongdoing and turn instead toward keeping God's law.

Joseph's brothers demonstrate their commitment to *teshuva* when they turn away from the wrong they once perpetrated against Joseph and instead offer themselves as slaves in place of Benjamin. This commitment to doing differently is what opens the gate to reconciliation. Judah's sacrificial confession and demonstration of repentance breaks the wall of hostility between Joseph and his brothers. Unable to control himself any longer, Joseph orders his attendants away. With loud sobs and wails, he unleashes the heartbreak he has held for decades. At last, he reveals himself to his brothers and tells his side of the story.

[pause]

But the story that Joseph tells is truly remarkable. He could have chosen to recount his brothers' violent transgressions and make them relive the details of their sin. He could have filled them in on all the suffering he endured as a slave and prisoner. He could have boasted of his cleverness and accomplishments – how he rose from slave to governor of all Egypt. He could have let loose his anger and used his power to punish his brothers.

It was well within his right to do all these things, but the story that Joseph tells is very different. He recognizes that his power over his brothers will not heal their relationship. And so, he drops the trappings of his office and finally speaks to his brothers in their native tongue. With great vulnerability he declares, "I am Joseph! Is my father really still alive?" (Gen 45:3 CEB). All he wants to know is if there is a possibility of seeing Jacob again.

And when his brothers respond with dumbfounded silence, too terrified of this revelation to speak, Joseph takes an additional step of vulnerability: He invites his brothers to draw near to him. He closes the physical space between them and in the process begins to bridge the chasm of alienation that separates them.

The story that Joseph tells is not a story of anger and revenge, but a story of faithfulness and providence – God's faithfulness and God's providence. Joseph tells his brothers, *Yes, you sold me into Egypt. This I have not forgotten. But what you intended for evil all those years ago, God has now redeemed for good.* Despite the terrible suffering he has endured, Joseph sees the hand of God at work, positioning him so one day he could deliver his own family from starvation.

Now, this does not mean that God ordained that Joseph's brothers betray him. As we have listened to the stories of Abraham and his descendants this summer, we have encountered the diverse ways that God's perfect will interacts with the free will of human beings. Though God has given us free will, our will is easily warped by sin, which sometimes leads us astray from the ways of God. But this is not a reason to despair! Because God's will is also faithfully at work underneath, alongside, and through ours, bending our stories in the direction of justice and mercy. Where Joseph's brothers were once bent on death, God was bent on preserving life – the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob's descendants, with whom He had made an everlasting covenant. Wherever there are signs of life instead of

death, reconciliation instead of estrangement, we can be confident that the will of God is at work.

In this tender moment, Joseph's will becomes aligned with God's. His choice to reconcile with his brothers is a choice to pursue life. He acts mercifully toward them, extending the blessings of his office to his family, inviting them to join him in Egypt where they will live under his protection and be well-cared for. Our Scripture lesson ends with Joseph embracing Benjamin and crying once more. But this time his tears are tears of healing. Our artist for this Sunday, Hannah Garrity, writes, "Forgiveness is an act of cleansing. It allows us to move on from past frustration and anger. Here, I imagine forgiveness as water flowing over the brothers as they embrace."¹ The Scripture says, "After this, his brothers were finally able to talk to him" (v. 15).

[pause]

The story of Joseph and his brothers' reconciliation is a model for how we can practice confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation in our own lives. But I want to be careful in highlighting that the impetus to forgive and reconcile belonged to Joseph alone. We cannot force someone we have hurt to forgive us. Joseph showed incredible vulnerability, mercy, and selfless love for his brothers. But while his actions are admirable, they are such precisely because they were offered freely. Forgiveness is a gift that we choose to give to set ourselves and others free from cycles of pain and retribution. Forgiveness cannot be bought. Even when we confess and repent – reconciling actions God commands us to take – these are not things we do to earn someone's forgiveness. These are things we do to prepare our hearts to receive forgiveness, so that if it is offered, we can understand just how costly and precious a gift that forgiveness is.

No gift of forgiveness was as costly and precious as the forgiveness we have received from God through Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus' cross has reconciled us to God – and this was God's gift of grace, offered freely to us before we even knew we needed it. Paul writes in his letter to the Romans: "It isn't often that someone will die for a righteous person, though maybe someone might dare to die for a good person. But God shows his love for us, because while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:7-8 CEB). This is the good news that we offer

¹ "Reconciled" by Hannah Garrity. Ink on paper. Inspired by Genesis 45:1-15. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.

each other every time we prepare to receive communion. Like Joseph beckoning his brothers closer, Jesus bridged the chasm of alienation between us and God with his own body, making a way for God's reconciling love.

We honor this gift of love and grace by practicing confession, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with each other. Christians should be experts in showing the world how reconciliation is done, because Jesus taught us not only to love our neighbors, but to love our enemies, too. These relational disciplines work to align our wills with God's will so that our words and actions may bend further and further in the direction of life. When you struggle to do any of these things, I encourage you to turn your eyes to the cross and remember the words of Jesus: "Freely ye have received, freely give" (Matt 10:8 KJV).

Amen.