

August 20, 2017 – Joseph & His Brothers

Genesis 45:1-15

Today is the last Sunday in our summer journey through the stories of the book of Genesis. We are ending with the story of Joseph. As today's story begins we find Joseph standing in front of his eleven brothers. Joseph is a powerful man - second only to the Pharaoh, the king, of Egypt. As is appropriate for someone of his status, Joseph has many attendants standing by him, waiting to do his bidding. But he asks them all to leave and they go without question.

Now in order to understand what happens next we have to go back and discover how Joseph and his brothers arrived at this place. You see, Joseph grew up in Canaan. He was the eleventh son of a man named Jacob. His mother was Rachel, a woman that Jacob loved beyond words. Rachel waited a long time before her first child was born and when Joseph arrived there was much rejoicing.

Joseph was his father's favourite son and Jacob didn't try to hide his feelings. He even gave Joseph a very special robe – a gift that made his brothers jealous. Then Joseph started to have dreams and those dreams seemed to suggest that one day all his older brothers would bow down before him. When he shared his dreams with his siblings they became so angry that they started forming a plot to kill him. Luckily, his oldest brother, Reuben, convinced the others that they could

rid themselves of their annoying brother in another way. So they sold Joseph to a passing caravan and assumed he would live in slavery for the rest of his life.

All of us are familiar with family discord. Some of you may even be able to understand how Joseph's brothers felt. Maybe there's someone in your family who is the obvious favourite and maybe that fact has caused feelings of jealousy and discontent. I come from a family of eight and I know how important it was for things to be divided equally amongst myself and my siblings. My mother still worries about treating us as equally as she can. But no matter how hard you try to be fair, there will always be upset feelings, jealousy and even anger. Many families have rifts that last for years. Some never truly mend.

In Joseph's case, his brothers took action against him that should have landed them in prison. But despite being sold into slavery, Joseph manages to thrive in Egypt. He flourishes because of his honest character and because of his amazing ability to interpret dreams. It's a long story (several chapters in the book of Genesis), but eventually Joseph gets the opportunity to interpret the dreams of the Pharaoh. Based on those dreams, Joseph predicts that there will be seven years of bountiful crops followed by seven years of drought and famine. In his gratitude, the Pharaoh gives Joseph the crucial task of storing food during the years of plenty and then distributing it as needed during the years of want.

The drought hits not only Egypt, but its neighbouring countries as well.

Eventually Joseph's brothers are forced to come in search of food for their

families. The first time they come, Joseph does not reveal his true identity. Instead he sends them home and tells them to bring their youngest brother Benjamin when they come again. As predicted, the drought continues and his brothers return. Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother, is with them and this time, Joseph can no longer hold back his feelings. He sobs loudly and in the midst of his weeping tells them who he is. He says, "It is I – Joseph! Is my father really still alive?"

At first his brothers are so upset by this revelation that they cannot speak. You can imagine the thoughts that would have been going through their heads. They had every reason to believe that their lives were over. Here was the brother that they had tried to kill, the brother that they had sold into slavery. And now he has the power to do with them what he will. They were probably picturing brutal forms of execution, spending the rest of their lives in prison or as slaves in Egypt.

But instead Joseph says, "Please don't rebuke yourselves for having sold me here. God sent me here ahead of you so that I could save your lives." Joseph believes that his brother's actions were a part of God's plan for his life. I don't believe in a God that directs our lives in that way, but I do believe that God is with us in difficult times and that God's loving presence helps us to make the best of whatever situation we end up in – whether that situation is of our own choosing or whether it is one that is forced upon us.

Joseph goes on to say, “You will live here near me in the territory of Goshen... I will provide for you here.” Joseph’s life has turned out well and he has chosen to forgive his brothers and to provide for their families. Despite the horrible way that he was treated, he is choosing a path of generosity and love. His actions are a wonderful example of God’s grace at work in the world.

But I wonder if he would have had that same generosity of spirit if his circumstances were different. If he had remained in slavery, if he had lived a life of hard labour, would he still be able to treat his siblings with such grace? It is certainly a lot easier to be forgiving, to be kind, when times are good. This is true in families and it is also true in churches, in communities and even in relations between cultures and races. But the reality is that grace is required in all times and in all places.

With all the hatred and the anger that has been demonstrated in the world this week in places like Barcelona, Finland and Charlottesville, it’s hard to imagine how reconciliation can be possible. But this is the exactly the time that voices of peace and love need to be heard. This is the time that actions of love and caring need to be experienced. In Barcelona people are responding by attending blood donor clinics in record numbers. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/barcelona-attack-spain-blood-clinics-banks-1.4254119> In Finland, their prime minister tweeted, “We need to stick together now, hate is not to be answered by hate.” <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/finland-stabbing-1.4254190> And here in Canada

yesterday's far-right rally in Vancouver was drowned out by the voices of thousands who came to express a message of love and understanding.

<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/anti-racism-rally-vancouver-city-hall-1.4253117>

Wherever jealousy, hate and anger arise, whether it be in family, church, community or among strangers, the Christian response is always one of love and understanding. We are called to do our best to understand the pain that has led others to words of hate and acts of violence. And, at the same time, we are called, through our own words and actions, to demonstrate the presence of God's love and forgiveness in the world. May we all follow Joseph's example of generosity and grace. Let's us sing of the power of God's unconditional love.

VU #266 Amazing Grace