

Lessons from the Patriarchs sermon series

“Joseph”

[Genesis 45:1-15](#)

Today is the final sermon from our sermon series called, “Lessons from the Patriarchs.” So far, we have reflected on the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. We now turn our attention to Joseph. Today’s scripture reading, Genesis 45:1-15, is just a little portion of Joseph’s story which is spread out from chapter 37 through chapter 50, but it is filled with rich images of forgiveness and reconciliation. And to better understand this encounter between Joseph and his brothers, we need to get the back-story. We need to know about their family background.

Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob, who had 12 sons by 4 women - his first wife, Leah and her maid, Zilpah, and his second wife, Rachel and her maid, Bilhah. Rachel had only two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. At the start of chapter 37 of Genesis, we hear how Jacob favors Joseph over the rest of his brothers. We are told that Jacob did so because Joseph was the child born to him in his old age. But, I suspect that there was an added layer to why he loved Joseph over the other sons. If you recall, Rachel was whom he had his eyes and heart set on marrying. But his father in law tricked him into marrying Leah, the older sister, first! And so Joseph was the much awaited first-born son of Rachel, whom he truly loved.

Perhaps for this reason, Jacob cannot help but make his favoritism obvious to everyone. He dresses Joseph in special clothing, what the text describes as a long coat of many colors. We can guess that it is a very fancy looking coat. And he keeps Joseph from working in the fields, unlike the rest of his half brothers. As you can imagine, this leads to jealousy. Jacob’s favoritism results in division among his children -- “[W]hen his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Gen. 37:4).

Unfortunately, Joseph, at the age of 17 at this point in the story, does nothing to ease the tension. In fact, it almost seems like he does everything he can to rub it in and make things worse. When he is sent to help his older brothers in the fields, he brings a bad report of their shepherding to their father. Then, he makes it a point to share not one, but two dreams he had that portrayed his brothers bowing down to him directly with them. The audacity to tell his second dream to his brothers, even after they got so upset with him the first time even takes Jacob by surprise. The combination of their father's favoritism and Joseph's behavior send the jealousy, resentment, and hatred the brothers have for Joseph boiling over.

One day, while the older sons are tending their father’s flocks in the fields, Jacob sends Joseph to check in on them. Imagine the emotions of the older brothers as they watch their spoiled little brother, who they can spot miles away due to his long, colorful coat, walking towards them. Though they initially conspire to kill him, they decide to throw him into a pit and later sell him to a slave trader instead. Then, they make their father believe that Joseph was killed by a wild animal by bringing back bloody fragments of his coat.

After this, Joseph is taken to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, one of the Egyptian king’s officials. Joseph quickly earns the trust of his master, who then puts him in charge of all his possessions. Things go well for Joseph until Potiphar’s wife tries to seduce him. When she could not convince Joseph to sleep with her, she tricks and accuses him of an attempted sexual assault, which Joseph gets him thrown in prison.

There, Joseph meets two imprisoned royal officials, the king's cupbearer and baker. Each of the men has a dream, and Joseph, known as the dreamer even in this foreign land, interprets their dreams. Soon, their dreams are fulfilled exactly as Joseph interpreted them. The cupbearer is freed, and the baker is persecuted. But, unfortunately, once he is freed and restored to his office, the cupbearer forgets about Joseph.

Two years later, Pharaoh, the Egyptian king has two dreams, but no one in his royal court can interpret them. It is then, that the cupbearer remembers Joseph and tells the king about this foreigner who is known for his accurate dream interpretation. Summoned by the king, Joseph interprets the king's dreams. He says there would be 7 good years, which will be followed by 7 bad years. Then, he advises Pharaoh to prepare for the years of famine during the time of plentiful harvest. Immediately, the king appoints Joseph as his second in command. During the next 7 years, Joseph successfully gathers and stores grain in abundance for use during the famine that he is predicting. The granary is so large beyond measure that he stops counting.

Truly, God worked in a mysterious and marvelous way in Joseph's life. Joseph was now the prime minister of the country where he was brought to as a slave 20 years ago. At this point in the story, he is married and has two sons. From the names he gives to his sons, we can see that Joseph has adjusted to his new life in Egypt. His older son's name means "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." His younger son's name means "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

When the drought Joseph had predicted hits the region, people from all around the area come to Egypt to buy food. And Joseph's family is no exception. The brothers are sent down by Jacob to purchase food, and they are completely oblivious from whom they are getting their life-saving supplies. There is no way for them to recognize Joseph. They have not seen him for over 20 years, and the last time they saw him was when they sold him off to an Egyptian merchant. He is now fully assimilated as an Egyptian, dressed and speaking like a local. Above all, how could they possibly imagine that the brother they turned into a slave would now be the prime minister of Egypt!

But, Joseph recognizes them right away. How could he not? They are the ones who hated him so much that they plotted to kill him. They are the ones who threw him into a pit and sold him into bondage. Living a new life in Egypt, Joseph must have tried to forget all about his family of origin. He probably thought he had completely gotten over the trauma he suffered at the hands of his own family, with all the personal and professional success he was enjoying. This was surely the hope when he named his first-born son "Manasseh." But, seeing his brothers for the first time, his heart reveals to him otherwise. Those deep wounds don't just go away. With their sudden appearance, everything his older brothers did to him comes back to life.

How could Joseph forget what his older brothers did to him? It was because of them, he was taken into slavery, humiliated by a false accusation, and thrown into prison. All of these things would not have happened to Joseph if it had not been for his wicked brothers. These people who had inflicted so much pain, so many tearful nights, hurt that still lingered 20 years later, were now bowing down before him in their desperate need.

But, why should he help them? Should they not get what they deserve? Surely, if Joseph punished them for what they did to him, it would be called justice. Actually, with his power, Joseph could do whatever he wanted to do. All methods of revenge were on the table. He could

simply have denied his brothers' request to buy food, or put them in jail or even have them all killed. But, that is not what Joseph decided to do. In that moment of encounter with his brothers who wronged him, he models for us true forgiveness. Let's examine today's scripture reading and see how Joseph forgives his brothers.

First, before he confronts his brothers, before he reveals himself to them, Joseph asks everyone except his brothers to leave the room. By doing so, he handles the matter privately. Friends, true forgiveness starts when you decide not to repeat your offense to other people, when you decide not to talk about the person who offended you to other people.

Taking this first step toward forgiveness is not easy because when we feel offended, our natural tendency is to tell other people about it instead of going to the person directly. Doing so, intentionally or unintentionally, we punish the person who has offended us. When you are tempted to do so, remember what Jesus said about forgiveness in the Gospel of Matthew. I am reading from the Message translation:

"If a fellow believer hurts you, go and tell him—work it out between the two of you. If he listens, you've made a friend. If he won't listen, take one or two others along, so that the presence of witnesses will keep things honest, and try again. If he still won't listen, tell the church. If he won't listen to the church, you'll have to start over from scratch, confront him with the need for repentance, and offer again God's forgiving love." (Matthew 18:15-17)

Second, Joseph forgives his brothers without demanding their repentance. Revealing his true identity to them, Joseph points out their offense to his brothers. He says, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." But, then he quickly moves on and talks about the future instead. Friends, true forgiveness is not contingent on the attitude of the offender. We have to forgive the person who wronged us not only when he or she is sorry, but because it is the right thing to do.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. (Ephesians 4:32) He wrote to the Colossian church, "Bear with each other and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you." (Colossians 3:13)

Third, Joseph tells his brothers, "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Make no mistake, this does not mean that Joseph's brothers are without guilt, that what they did was not abusive and wrong. Joseph's interpretation does not remove their guilt. God did not cause the brothers to commit a crime. God did not cause Joseph to suffer. What God did was bringing good out of evil. Through Joseph, God demonstrated that no situation is past redemption. And this blessing is one that gives life to not just the individual. It is meant to be shared. People and nations are saved through Joseph. And Joseph is able to forgive his brothers when he sees the whole thing, the whole scope of his life through the lens of faith. Friends, this is true forgiveness.

Finally, the brothers put down their guard and accept Joseph's forgiveness by embracing and kissing him. If it looks like forgiveness and reconciliation happen are happening too smoothly and immediately, you're right. Actually, forgiveness was a long process for Joseph. When he sees his brothers for the first time in 20 years, Joseph is not sure of what to do. He recognizes his brothers yet hides his identity from them. Speaking to them through an interpreter, he accuses them of spying. He locks them up for three days. He gives them food but demands that next time they bring their younger brother, Benjamin, the new favored

son in the family, to prove that they are telling the truth. They come back with Benjamin, but Joseph sets a trap for them and falsely accuses them of stealing.

You can read all about this back and forth between Joseph and his brothers in chapters 42, 43, and 44. True to our own lives, it looks like Joseph is working out his hurt and pain. He is trying to figure out if he can trust those who have hurt him, if he can let them into his life again. Forgiveness is not something that happens overnight. It is a long, sometimes messy and painful process.

The story of Joseph and his family is our story, too. If God could bring forgiveness and reconciliation to them, there is hope for us, too. May this blessing be for us as individuals, as well as the church!
Amen.