

First Presbyterian Church  
Bozeman, Montana  
Dan Krebill, co-pastor

August 20, 2017  
20<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Genesis 45:1-15

### **Holding out for Reconciliation**

Because the reading from the Old Testament is part of a much larger and longer story in the Bible, it's helpful to set the stage for what we're about to read. Professor Carol J. Dempsey, in her commentary on this story, provides a very helpful introductory synopsis of the story leading up to our passage today. She writes,

The Joseph story, [is] one of the most beloved stories of the Torah. . . . It describes how a favored younger son [of Jacob], despised by his older brothers, grows up to be a trusted ruler in the house of an Egyptian Pharaoh. Joseph, tossed into a pit by his brothers and then sold to a group of Midianite traders, who in turn sell him to an Egyptian official, Potiphar, becomes a source of hope and life for his brothers and his father Jacob, all of whom fall prey to a famine in Canaan that leaves the family fearing for its life. Living in a land of plenty, Joseph comes to the rescue of his family, all by chance, when his brothers journey to Egypt in search of grain. Joseph recognizes them immediately, but they do not recognize Joseph, whom they have treated badly earlier in time. Genesis 45:1–15 [which we're about to read] is one episode in the Joseph cycle of stories that captures the heartfelt reunion of all the brothers and the gift of forgiveness that Joseph extends to those who once treated him unkindly. (*Feasting on the Word: Year A additional essays*, © 2011 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 2)

*[read Genesis 45:1-15]*

This story of Joseph, of which we just read the last part, is one of the most beloved of all the stories in the Bible. Like any great classic story it has conflict—even violent conflict—, mystery, intrigue, betrayal, deceit, joy, sorrow, heartbreak, dreaming and scheming, natural disasters, funky family dynamics, riches and wealth, as well as love and resolution and reconciliation. It's a human story to which we can relate because of the feelings and emotions that are central to it.

It's also a divine story—a sacred story—because of the role of faith and the role that God plays. It's a story that has stood the test of time both within the faith community as well as beyond it.

The Broadway musical hit, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, is a 1970s and 80s modern rock opera adaptation of this story. Perhaps you have seen this musical at one point or another across the years. The music from this production has stood the test of time as well. And it has become a great way to share Joseph's story beyond the faith community.

To get the full impact of the story of Joseph and his brothers, you really need to read the full story that begins in chapter 37 of Genesis. And I hope that some of you, after this morning, will want to go back and read this amazing story.

At its heart, this story is about the power of forgiveness and the reconciliation that follows forgiveness. It is worth noting that this is perhaps the most powerful story of forgiveness and reconciliation in the entire Bible—Old and New Testaments alike—apart from the story of Jesus itself. That this story is from the Hebrew Bible book of Genesis—the first in the Bible—is a potent corrective to

the idea that forgiveness and reconciliation are Biblical themes that don't really fully emerge until the New Testament.

This story is from the earliest history of the people of God. It's a story that we share fully with our Jewish brothers and sisters to this day. The story of Joseph also appears in a chapter of the Qur'an which adds to its nearly universal influence on all of the 3 great Abrahamic traditions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Forgiveness, reconciliation and the peace that follows are themes that are way bigger than the Christian religion, way bigger than the Jewish religion, and way bigger than the religion of Islam. All of these religious traditions point to this important and very powerful expression of what it means to be in proper relationship with one another in the human family. They point to our creator God's intention for the creatures he created.

So let's take a closer look at the essence of this story. And while I distill it to the most basic human dynamics, again, I would encourage you to read this story in its fullness. For the story's details are such that they add tremendously to the full impact of the final outcome.

The story begins with Jacob who had 12 sons. While brothers, they did not all have the same mother. This led to jockeying among them as they related to their father and seeking his favor. As the story unfolds, it becomes absolutely clear that Jacob favors one of his youngest sons—Joseph, whose mother is Rachel. Jacob makes no bones about it that Joseph is his favorite. One of ways that Jacob makes this clear is by giving Joseph a very special garment—what the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible calls a robe with long sleeves. Other translations have rendered it as a coat of many colors. And again, Tim Rice called it an amazing technicolor dreamcoat. Whatever the name, it was very special and served as a highly visible and outward reminder to Joseph's brothers that he was the favored son. And they were not happy about this at all.

Then to make his brothers even more jealous and angry, Joseph shares with them a couple of his dreams in which he, Joseph, was so special that his brothers were made to bow down to him.

Their hatred for their brother became so intense that they took an opportunity to sell Joseph into the hands of some foreign traders who took him off to Egypt never to be seen again—or so the brothers hoped. So sure they'd never see him again, that they concocted a story to convince their father, Jacob, that Joseph had been killed and devoured by a wild animal. This news devastated Jacob to the point that he declared he would never fully recover from his grief in this life.

Years and years passed with many details provided in the pages of scripture. Suffice it to say that in those years, Joseph, through many amazing and fortuitous circumstances, rose to power and prominence in Egypt to the point that he was virtually second only to the Egyptian Pharaoh himself.

Meanwhile back in Canaan, where Jacob and his sons and their families lived, a serious and life-threatening famine came over the land. So severe became this famine, that Jacob's extended family was threatened with starvation. So some of the brothers headed off to Egypt to try to obtain rations that would sustain them through the famine.

This is where Joseph and his brothers come into contact with each other since Joseph is the Pharaoh's designee in charge of distribution of food aid.

As soon as Joseph sees his brothers, he recognizes them. However, they do not recognize their brother Joseph. Joseph chooses not to reveal his identity to them in the first part of this section of the

story that has the brothers going back and forth to Canaan with provisions and with mischief and mystery, courtesy of their brother. Again, there are lots of juicy details in this section of the story.

To the reader of this story it may seem a mystery at first why Joseph doesn't punish his brothers for what they did to him. Rather, because of Joseph's love for his father and for his younger brother, Benjamin, Joseph actually showers his brothers with abundant provisions.

Finally, when we get to the point of today's finale passage, Joseph can hold out no longer and reveals his identity to his brothers, who are absolutely terrified when they learn this truth. They knew full well that they were responsible for Joseph's disappearance and their devastating deceit of their father in claiming Joseph had died. They knew they deserved punishment for their infractions.

But what happens instead is nothing short of miraculous. Joseph, as he talks to his brothers through emotional tears, seeks to share his understanding of what transpired in the intervening years—namely that understood through the lens of the omnipotent power of God, the sequence of events over the years were for the good of Jacob and his family. And as the curtain falls on this part of the story, Joseph "kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him." (Gen. 45:15)

This is a story of hatred transformed into love. For Joseph who had every reason to hate his brothers who had completely denounced him and faked his death, he found deeper meaning and purpose as the events of his life in Egypt unfolded. While his love for his father and younger brother never wavered, in the end that love blossomed into a fulness of love for all of his brothers and their families.

And for the brothers who experienced resentment and jealousy that led to a hatred so strong that they all but killed Joseph and expunged him from their lives, found in the end that when their hatred was met with the unexpected love from the object of their hatred, their hearts were transformed completely.

Clearly, this is a God story in which God is at work in the mundane life experiences that when taken at face value would have resulted in understandable division, strife and hatred. But this story is nothing of the sort. It's a story that speaks of the possibilities for transformative love and reconciliation even in the most extreme circumstances.

It's a Biblical example of a quote of Nelson Mandela, that when tweeted a week ago became the most liked tweet of all time. That quote is from Mandela's 1994 autobiography "Long Walk to Freedom" that said, "No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite."

Among many other prominent leaders who have responded to the horrific display of hatred and division that occurred in Charlottesville, Virginia a little over a week ago, President Obama tweeted this helpful reminder from Mandela who himself was an incredible case in point for the healing power of love in response to hatred and division in South Africa.

In this last 10 days we have witnessed a number of events in which terror and division are being sowed by those who seek to lord it over one another—whether it be by way of race and skin color, or by religions perverted by extremism. We've seen it in Charlottesville, in Barcelona, Spain, in Sierra Leone and even in Finland.

These violent eruptions in which many have died and where many more have been seriously injured, and where fear and terror have been sowed, are immediate and urgent reminders to people of faith around the world that we must respond to stand up to all of this and be the agents, the representatives, the emissaries, the voices and the examples or counter-examples where transformative love prevails and where love takes hold, takes root and branches out over the entire created order.

People of Christian, Jewish and Islamic faith have been standing up to be counted as those who witness to a narrative that stands in stark contrast to that spewed by racists and terrorists. This story of Joseph and his brothers is a powerful narrative that informs the very foundation of this central part of our faith traditions.

Like Joseph, who could no longer contain his concealed true identity from his brothers, and burst out with the truth, we as God's people cannot stand idly by concealing our true identity of those who stand with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has no tolerance for that which segments and divides the people God created to be one human community.

My friends, these seeming dark days in which we find the ugly face of racism reemerging, in these days when the threat of nuclear war is reemerging with saber rattling between nations, in these days when terrorism spewed by extremists continues, we as people of Christian faith must stand up and be counted as those who affirm that the power of love given by our creator God can and will lead to reconciliation and the full restoration of the human community in which all are fully valued as precious creatures of God and objects of divine love.