

Genesis - 37 - 50

The last 38 Chapters of Genesis, which started with the story of Abraham last week and end with the story of Joseph, tell the story of the first three generations of the family through whom God chose to bring his blessings to the whole world. Having no particular power, position, wealth, fame, ability, or moral superiority of their own, they accepted God's call to trust him to provide for them and fulfill the great vision he had for them. Although God proved faithful in every way, their own faithfulness was often fitful, timid, foolish, and precarious. They proved to be as dysfunctional as any family, yet they maintained, or at least kept returning to, the seed of faith God placed in them. Functioning in a broken world, surrounded by hostile people and powers, by faith they "invoked blessings for the future" and lived according to God's promises.

We continue today with Jacob and his sons, Abraham's great-grandsons. Many years after selling their brother Joseph into slavery, the sons of Jacob have been reunited with Joseph and saved from starvation because of his position of power in Egypt. Yet the brothers' shared emotion quickly becomes clear: they still fear Joseph. "Now Joseph will show his anger and pay us back for all the wrong we did to him," they said."

This is not surprising. After all, Joseph manipulated his brothers when they first arrived in Egypt. Of course they did not recognize him as the Prince of Egypt. Joseph held one brother hostage and framed another for stealing. Joseph is a powerful man; anything he wishes to do to his brothers, he can accomplish. This reconciliation turns out to be a flimsy co-existence at best. At one time they had bowed to the Prince of Egypt, ironically fulfilling Joseph's childhood dream; now they do so in full recognition of his identity, and their crime. If the brothers' perception of Joseph has not changed, their attitude toward him has not changed, either. They are still liars and manipulators themselves.

Since his rise to the position of administrator of the government's supply of

grain in Egypt, Joseph has had all the official power. As the one who is wronged, Joseph also has the interpersonal power, the power to forgive. These two sides of Joseph's power - the personal and the political - combine when Joseph makes his theological proclamation: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people" - and not just the Israelites, but the Egyptians as well - a definite indication of God's inclusivity in the blessing of all people of the earth as promised to Abraham.

Again we are reminded that Joseph had always been the favourite son. When Jacob dies, it is Joseph who undertakes the embalming and burial rites, while the brothers blend into the vast Egyptian multitude accompanying Joseph to Canaan. The brothers have good reason to be worried. With Jacob dead and buried, Joseph is now in a position to retaliate - and perhaps he has been nursing a grudge all along.

The brothers frame their petition for forgiveness as if they are simply conveying their father's last wishes to Joseph: "Before your father died, he instructed us to say to you: 'Please forgive your brothers for the great wrong they did to you - for their sin in treating you so cruelly.' So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin." Not only do we not know whether Jacob actually issued these instructions, we do not know whether he ever knew what the brothers had done, or how Joseph ended up in Egypt.

Whether or not the brothers are lying, their words betray lingering guilt. Joseph has already forgiven them; yet they do not appeal to Joseph as their brother, or, as sons of the same father, but only as slaves of their father's God. "So we, the servants of the God of your father, beg you to forgive our sin."

So, does he forgive them? His first response is to weep, an indication of his deep love and attachment to his family. Despite what has transpired between them, Joseph weeps. Is his weeping as a sign of forgiveness and

reconciliation? Perhaps, but it does nothing to alleviate the brothers' guilt. Unable to accept Joseph's weeping as a sign of his love, they humble themselves, "We are your slaves."

Surprisingly, Joseph has learned to avoid bitterness and to forgive. He had been repeatedly hurt. His own brothers had planned to kill him, but sold him into slavery at the last moment. As Potiphar's slave, Joseph's life is a classic lesson on how to overcome bitterness. He was faithful and upright, but was falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar's wife. He spent years in prison and was forgotten by a man he had helped, who could have pleaded his case with Pharaoh. Yet in spite of all this, Joseph never grew bitter toward God nor toward those who had wronged him. Unlike most, he never looked for revenge nor tried to get even - even though many like to believe that revenge is sweet.

Three mean-looking guys on motorcycles pulled into a truck stop cafe where a truck driver, a little guy, was sitting at the counter, quietly eating his lunch. The three thugs saw him, grabbed his food, and laughed in his face. The truck driver didn't say a word. He got up, paid for his food and walked out. One of the bikers, unhappy that they hadn't succeeded in provoking the little man into a fight, bragged to the waitress, "He sure wasn't much of a man, was he?" The waitress replied, "No, I guess not." Then, glancing out the window she added, "I guess he's not much of a truck driver, either. He just ran over three motorcycles."

The familiar saying, "Don't get mad, get even" sums up the world's philosophy of how to deal with someone who wrongs you. But in contrast to the world's way, God prescribes a radical approach when we are wronged. Paul wrote to the Ephesians: "... be kind to each other, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God through Christ has forgiven you."

It's easy to say that, but it's tough to apply it. The difficulty increases in proportion to how badly one has been hurt. When the pain that has been caused is consuming you, it's hard to forgive, even if he repents, at least not

until he's suffered a while. You want him to know what it feels like. You want him to pay. But if you're bitter and unforgiving, you're not obeying the two great commandments, to love God and to love others. In Hebrews we read: "Look after each other so that none of you fails to receive the grace of God. Watch out that no poisonous root of bitterness grows up to trouble you, corrupting many."

Bitterness holds your soul in bondage and hinders God's blessings from flowing to you and through you. Forgiveness frees you to experience God's abundant grace and to make you a channel of that grace even toward those who wronged you. God has not put anyone through anything he himself was not willing to experience. Jesus, the son of God, came to seek our welfare, but was rejected and killed. He suffered - the just for the unjust - in order to offer us God's forgiveness.

And so Joseph shifts the question of forgiveness to the only relationship the brothers claim. They are God's servants; is it not therefore God's business to forgive them? "Am I in the place of God?" he asks. The implied answer being no, the next question, then, is, how does God see the matter? "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

Joseph acknowledges that the brothers have done him wrong, but he also says God sees something else in the brothers' design. Since God has construed the brothers' deed as a means of achieving good, it is not Joseph's place to judge or, for that matter, to forgive.

So Joseph throws the question back on the brothers, since this business of forgiveness is a matter between themselves and the God they serve. Maybe Joseph does not forgive his brothers. But does that mean they are not forgiven? We are left with a sense that their crime continues to haunt them, and we wonder what it will take for them to forgive themselves. Joseph sees the ways his own personal story and that of his family are wrapped up in the stories of God's relationship with Israel.

The Joseph cycle reads like a family drama: parental favouritism leads to sibling rivalry and swells to violence pitting eleven brothers against one. Even so, the story also has broader political implications. This section of Genesis is a “court story”, a genre of literature that seems to have been particularly popular in the post-exilic Diaspora.

In these court stories, a Jewish hero finds himself or herself holding favoured status in a foreign court. The hero's rise to power may be a result of special insights, like dream interpretation, or it may be because of his or her piety. Once elevated, the hero has the opportunity to save his or her family or people because of that access to the imperial power.

In the post-exilic era, stories like Joseph, Daniel, and Esther made powerful statements about how to retain religious and ethnic identity in a foreign land. They also reminded Jews in Diaspora that God's faithfulness to Israel and God's continuing fidelity to God's chosen people had not wavered, despite the exile and the ever-changing political landscape.

Joseph's declaration that “God intended it for good” reminds us that the stories of biblical families are not just lectionary-sized snippets of individual family dramas, but rather they are part of the long and ongoing story of God's relationship with Israel, chosen for blessing and in whom all families of the earth will be blessed as we heard in the story of God's promise to Abraham.

The conclusion to the Joseph story raises some exciting and far-reaching theological themes:

1) Forgiveness: Joseph's brothers are terrified now that their father Jacob has died. They are well aware of their sin committed against their brother. From a human perspective, they expect that he will get even with them, that he will seek revenge. Up to now he was inhibited by his desire not to bring any more grief to his father. With their father gone, there is nothing to hold back Joseph from punishing them. They tell Joseph that Jacob's dying wish was that he forgive them. It may or may not be true, but, it shows how desperate they

were to persuade Joseph to forgive. For the family that has known disruption, favoritism, hostility, and deceit all through Genesis - there is hope for reconciliation. One marvels at the graciousness of Joseph who is actually able to forgive after all of this.

2) Suffering for others: We tend to search to find meaning in our suffering. Sometimes (surely, not always), suffering turns out to be for the benefit of other people. Having had to bear the suffering of slavery in Egypt, Joseph ended up in the right place at the right time to save many people from famine. What looked like a hopeless life of slavery in a foreign land turned out to be a way in which many people were saved. Joseph's suffering had some meaning after all, though he could not see that until the end of the story. Likewise, with enough hindsight, we may find that our suffering, at least in part, has had some benefit for self or others.

3) God's will and human sin: Since the story had a happy ending, one might be tempted to say that it was all God's will. God needed Joseph in Egypt to plan for the famine. Did God persuade the brothers to sell him as a slave in order to accomplish God's purposes? Or did the brothers do it on their own, committing a sinful act against their own brother? The Joseph story attempts to say that both are true. The brothers really did sin. It is never nice to sell your brother as if he were a commodity. Yet God was at work in all of this, even in the sins that humans commit. God is always working toward the good, even when what we do is wrong, hateful, evil. God does not cause us to sin. Neither does God leave us alone to bear the results of our wrongdoing. Even what seems a disaster, a terrible experience of suffering, can be redeemed by a loving God and changed into something good. We know this in a deeply profound way in the story of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The penitent words of the brothers led Joseph to one of the finest theological points of his life and, much of Genesis. He told his brothers: "You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought me to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don't be afraid. I will continue to

take care of you and your children.” Joseph’s reference to “many people” echoes God’s covenantal promise to bless “all families of the earth”. In Ephesians we read: “Now all glory to God, who is able, through his mighty power at work within us, to accomplish infinitely more than we might ask or think.” God sent far more blessing than Joseph could have ever asked or imagined.

Joseph saw himself as an agent of God who was instrumental in effecting the work of God with his people. He knew the harm that people were capable of and accepted that sometimes people are their own worst enemies. He knew the family stories of faith mixed with doubt, of faithful service mingled with self-preservation, of both truth and deceit. He also knew of the promises God made to Abraham, of God’s commitment to bless this family, and of God’s wisdom in working with his people as he refined them through the fires of life. He did not paint over their sins; rather, he absorbed them into his awareness of God’s grand work. In his wise power, God is capable of working with our faithfulness, mending our weakness, and forging our failures to accomplish what God himself has prepared for us - for those who love him.

Amen.

PRAYERS OF THE PEOPLE September 22, 2024

PRAYERS FOR THE WORLD

Loving God, Like Joseph, we don't always understand why things happen the way they do; why our plans and dreams aren't fulfilled or fail, and at times we find ourselves facing challenge after challenge, and disappointment after disappointment. Yet, like Joseph, we also believe that You are at work in our lives, and that You have a larger plan and purpose for each one of us.

In love You created us, and in love You sustain us, day after day. So it is with confidence that we bring our prayers to You, knowing that You will hear and respond according to your will. We pray for those who, like Joseph, find themselves deeply wounded by people they love — people they thought they knew and trusted — and who are struggling to know how to carry on with their lives.

We pray for those who are estranged from spouse or family, friends or neighbours; who find it difficult to forgive past wrongs done to them.

We pray for those who for years have carried feelings of guilt or regret for something they did or something they neglected to do; who find it difficult to ask for forgiveness or to forgive themselves.

We pray for those who, like Joseph, have had their hopes and dreams crushed; those whose lives have suddenly taken a difficult or different turn, and who now wonder what lies ahead for them.

We pray for those who find themselves far away from You, struggling to overcome their doubts or disillusionment, and who wonder how to find their way back.

We call out the evils of war with the Russian aggression upon Ukraine, Israel and Gaza, and Lebanon. May peace-building efforts replace the focus of supplying more deadly weapons. We pray that a peace can be brokered.

Loving God, it is not Your will that any should suffer. We offer our prayers for all those who hunger and thirst, those who live in the midst of violence or poverty, and those who feel abandoned or ignored by the world around them.

This week we remember Living Faith Lutheran in Sechelt and Rev. Richard Hergesheimer and Rev. Glenn Inglis; Lord of Life Mission in Sandspit - Rev. Jim Whaley, our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and

Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land, We pray for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, acting Primate Archbishop Anne Germond of the Anglican church in Canada; all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers as they lead their congregations in these challenging times of climate change and natural disasters around the world.

We pray for the millions of refugees and migrants around the world, looking for homes and safety, a place to dream and live in peace, free from wars, conflicts and violence. Protect and support all the homeless in our own communities and around the world. Help them find refuge and keep them safe.

We pray for those watching someone they love cope with serious illness or injury, and who long for Your miraculous intervention; We pray for all who suffer from physical, emotional, or mental illness. We uplift Bishop Kathy and Pr. Kristin Steele ... Bring them healing and hope. Support all who are undergoing therapies and treatments including those living with substance use disorders.

Let us pray for an end to the divisions and inequalities that scar God's creation, particularly the barriers to freedom faced by God's children throughout the world because of gender, race, sexual orientation, religious beliefs, ageism or physical limitations. We pray that all who have been formed in God's image might have equality in pursuit of the blessings of creation.

Gracious and loving God, give us faith to trust in You no matter what challenges we face. Give us courage to place our dreams and ambitions in Your hands, and then follow where You lead without hesitation, confident that Your loving presence is with us whatever the circumstances.

Amen.

As God's children, and heirs with Christ, we pray in the Spirit the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying:

Our Father ...