

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. [2] And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. [3] Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

[4] Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. [5] And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. [6] For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. [7] God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. [8] So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. [9] Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. [10] You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. [11] I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' [12] And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. [13] You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." [14] Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. [15] And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

GOD AND THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY

The sermon title in the bulletin is a question. What is providence? We'll answer that question in a few minutes. But, as I studied for the sermon this week I thought another title might be better, God and the Dysfunctional Family.

Now there is a sermon title that hits all of us where we live. The perfect family does not exist. All of us struggle with family relationships. It's always something.

Maybe we're struggling with young people who are making that difficult transition from living at home to independent living. Maybe we're struggling with the effects of aging. Maybe we're going through a painful divorce.

It's always something. No one is immune to the problem.

As humorist Erma Bomback put it in one of her best selling books, “Family: The Ties that Bind and Gag.”

I read once that Erma, a stay at home mom during the 60s was depressed. She thought that everyone else had a normal family and that she was the only one with problems.

But, when she began to write her humorous books on family life she found that almost everyone had a dysfunctional family. In fact her humorous take on her messed up family helped other women deal with their problem.

So forget about the myth of the perfect family. It doesn't exist. Is your family messed up? Great, join the club. In fact when you look at the Bible from the human side of the equation, those families were also quite dysfunctional.

ABRAHAM

In the Old Testament God was often known as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Think about the lives of those Patriarchs.

Abraham out of fear tried to pass off his wife as his sister and allowed the Egyptian Pharaoh to even take her as his wife. Later on in a bid to further the family line Abraham had a child with his servant, Hagar. That one act of infidelity was a disaster not only for the family but caused problems for many years to come.

Finally, Abraham and Sarah did have a son named Isaac.

But, it wouldn't be long before there was another problem. Abraham thought that God wanted him to sacrifice his only son on a wild and windy mountain.

Fortunately God intervened, but we can only imagine the trauma that this caused young Isaac. Can you imagine what you would think if you own father wanted to sacrifice you and almost did?

ISAAC AND JACOB

So, Isaac grew up to be a weak and ineffectual father. His wife Rebekah was the real power in the family.

There were two brothers in Isaac's family, Jacob and Esau. Esau was the first-born but just barely. Brother Jacob struggled with him in the womb and was grabbing at his heel when birth occurred.

Talk about sibling rivalry. This rivalry started before the boys were even born!

And the rivalry continued. Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright with the help of his mother, Rebekah. (Rebekah liked Jacob best. Isaac liked Esau best.)

The family squabble turned ugly. Esau threatened to kill his brother and so Jacob had to go stay with his uncle Laban until his hotheaded brother cooled down.

Jacob continued to be a con artist. He always was trying to figure the angles and get the best deal. And as his father Isaac played favorites with his children, Jacob learned to do the same thing.

Jacob married two women, Leah and Rachel. But, Jacob loved Rachel best.

Leah had ten children. Rachael only had two. And unfortunately Rachel died having their last child Benjamin. So, what do you think Jacob did? He favored the children of Rachel (Joseph and Benjamin) over the children of Leah.

Jacob paid a high price for his life of scheming. There was always conflict in Jacob's life, and the lives of his children were no different. Jacob always had a trick up his sleeve, and his children grew up to be the same way. They were devious, just like their father, and this led to the most tragic betrayal in the family's history.

JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Jacob especially loved Joseph. He was, as the Bible puts it, "the son of his old age." He gave him a regal coat of many colors. He doted on him and listened to his advice above all others.

And, as you might imagine, the sons of Leah resented Joseph. In fact, they were never able to have a civil conversation with him.

Joseph didn't help matters. He was always tattling to his father about his half-brother's lousy work habits. And when Joseph had a dream that his brothers would one day bow down to him, instead of discreetly keeping the dream to himself, Joseph went directly to his brothers with the news. Joseph was only seventeen when he had this dream, and we know that teenagers are sometimes not so humble when it comes to their relationship with their siblings.

Joseph then had another dream after this one in which the sun, the moon and the eleven stars were bowing down to him. Of course Joseph immediately told that to dream to his brothers as well.

Even Jacob thought that dream was a bit too grandiose and warned his son against claiming too much.

But, it was too late. Now there was too much bad blood between Joseph and his brothers. The ten sons of Leah were just waiting for the opportunity to show Joseph that his dreams were their nightmare.

He wasn't "the boss of them," not now or in the future. These half-brothers had dreams of their own when it came to Joseph, and soon they got the opportunity to see their dreams fulfilled.

SOLD INTO SLAVERY

One day when Jacob sent Joseph out into the fields to check on his brothers, the brothers saw him coming and quickly hatched a plan to get rid of their troublesome half-brother. The brothers relieved Joseph of his pretty, long-sleeved coat and threw him in a pit to die.

But, later their anger cooled a bit, and they thought better of killing their brother. After all, even though he was only a half-brother and a troublemaker, he was still their flesh and blood.

So, they pulled him out of the pit and sold him into slavery for twenty pieces of silver. Joseph's brothers covered their tracks by dipping their brother's coat in the blood of a goat. They took it to poor old Jacob and asked, "Is this Joseph's robe?"

Of course Jacob recognized it. He assumed that a wild animal had killed his son. His sons tricked the old trickster just as he had deceived his own father long ago. It's funny how family history has a way of repeating itself.

And so Jacob was beside himself with grief. He refused to be comforted. He had many other children, but Jacob could only think of the child that was lost.

BUYING GRAIN IN EGYPT

It would be many years before Joseph would see his father and his brothers again. Joseph would see good times and bad, but eventually through his God-given ability to interpret dreams, he would rise to a position of prominence in Egypt. Because of Joseph's wise administration, Egypt was the only country that had food in a time of famine.

And that prompted Jacob to send his sons to Egypt to buy grain. And who was in charge of distributing the grain to the foreigners who came his way? Joseph was in charge. Joseph was no longer a 17-year-old boy. He was 30 years old and dressed in Egyptian garb. His brothers didn't even recognize him.

What's that old saying, "Revenge is a dish best served cold?" At first it looked like Joseph might be willing to test the truth of that old saying. Joseph toyed with his brothers, suggesting that they were spies.

In their fear and in a desperate effort to prove that they weren't spies Joseph's brothers blurted out, "We're just brothers from Canaan seeking grain. There were twelve of us. Our youngest brother is at home with his father and the twelfth brother; well I'm afraid he is no more."

Joseph said, “Okay, I’ll give you a chance. I’ll see if you are telling the truth. I’ll put all of you but one in prison. The one that I free can go home and bring this younger brother back. In this way I’ll know that you haven’t been lying to me.”

Later Joseph released the brothers from prison and said, “Since I’m a God fearing man, I will make you an even better deal. I’ll release all of you but one. One will stay here in prison while you go home and fetch your youngest brother.”

(Now Joseph was speaking to his brothers in Egyptian through an interpreter, and the brothers had no idea that Joseph understood what they were saying.)

Apparently, Joseph’s brothers had lived with a deep sense of remorse ever since they sold their brother into slavery. The first thing that popped into their mind was what they had done to Joseph.

They began to talk among themselves saying, “We’re paying the penalty for what we did to our brother. God is getting us for our bad behavior.”

One brother, Reuben who had tried to prevent the others from hurting Joseph said,

"Didn't I tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."

Joseph was tearful when he heard the remorse of his brothers, but he turned his back on them so that they couldn't see his tears. Once he regained his composure, Joseph had his half-brother Simeon bound and placed in prison and then he sent the brothers back home to get their younger brother, Benjamin.

But, Joseph played a trick on his brothers. In addition to the grain he gave them, he also placed the money they paid for the grain in their sacks.

When the brothers came home, they and Jacob were horrified to find the money as well as the grain in the sacks.

At first Jacob was not willing to allow Benjamin to accompany his brothers on a trip back to Egypt, but eventually he relented when Reuben and Judah promised to guard young Benjamin with their lives.

BACK TO EGYPT

So the brothers went back to Egypt with Benjamin. Joseph wined and dined his brothers and was especially touched to see his young brother.

But, Joseph was not quite ready to quit toying with his brothers either. Again he had money placed in their sacks of grain, and in Benjamin's sack he placed his own silver cup.

The brothers had traveled only a short distance from Egypt when Joseph ordered his men to stop them and search their bags for his silver cup. Of course it was found in Benjamin's bag and Joseph told the brothers that for this offense the young man would be his slave.

At this point Joseph's half-brother Judah makes an emotional plea and offers to give up his freedom so that Benjamin might go free.

Judah says that he can't bear to see what will happen to his father if they do not bring Benjamin home. He knows that the old man will surely die if they come home without this boy.

A GREATER DREAM

Now, all of this provides the background for our lesson for today. Joseph and his brothers dreamed of power and glory. But, now in a moment of emotional release it all comes clear to Joseph.

There was more to this story than he had ever imagined. It wasn't just about his dreams or the dreams of his brothers or the dreams of his father. There was a greater power at work.

And so Joseph sends all the Egyptians out of the room and tearfully reveals himself to his brothers. Of course Joseph's brothers are not thrilled with this revelation either. But, Joseph finally convinces them that he wishes them no harm.

Joseph says, "It was God's will that I come to this land so that you and many others might be saved from this famine. God's dream was greater than any of our dreams. God has taken a bad situation and turned it into something good. What you meant for evil God has used for good."

There were tears of joy and forgiveness that day because a broken family was reunited. But, this story is about something much greater than just the reuniting of one family.

This story illustrates how God brings salvation to the world.

PROVIDENCE?

Now we can answer the question asked by my sermon title. What is providence?

Providence is how God works for good even when we are evil. Providence describes the grace of God that transcends our dysfunctional family relationships.

God didn't want the brothers to do evil and attempt to get rid of Joseph. There was a terrible price paid for what happened.

Through the story we learned that the brothers lived with a great burden of guilt as they saw the anguish on Jacob's face every day. They knew they had done wrong, and they lived with the consequences of their sin.

But, God used their evil choices to bring about reconciliation in the family and the hope of a greater salvation. Professor Walter Brueggeman sums it up this way; "Neither the freedom of the creature nor the gracious sovereignty of God is canceled."

SINS OF THE FATHERS

The Bible tells us that the sins of the fathers are visited upon our children and our children's children. Some might think that this viewpoint is too pessimistic, but family therapists have demonstrated this to be a fact of life.

We speak about this problem in a different way now; we use fancy phrases like "dysfunctional family systems." But, the idea is simple. Children learn what they live.

For example, the children of alcoholics often spend their whole lives reacting to their parent's problems. The same can be true of parents who were workaholics or any number of other problems.

Whatever the problem, the story of our parents is often repeated in our lives and the lives of our children and even our children's children. The bad news is that sin has a historical effect.

But, the good news according to the Bible is that God can change us. There is a way out of the mess that many of us find ourselves in. We don't have to have to repeat the mistakes of the past.

A NEW DREAM

But, in order to break this vicious cycle of past sins, we need a new dream, a new explanation of why we're here and what it's all about.

This in a nutshell is the story of Joseph.

Joseph was given a new dream, a dream that changed not only his life but also the lives of his family. Joseph did not live an easy life. On the contrary, much of the time it seemed like if it weren't for bad luck he'd have no luck at all.

But, in the end, the dream, God's dream, proved to be true. In a way that no one could imagine or predict God's will was done.

A BIGGER PICTURE

The same is true in our lives. We are free, and we freely make bad choices that bring pain to others and ourselves. Our sins have real consequences that are greater than we might imagine.

In our lesson for today the pain of sinful behavior is not excused or minimized. Part of the reason Joseph and his brothers cry so long and so loudly is that they recognize all that they have lost. They will never get back the years they could have spent together. They will never be able to forget that they brought their father sorrow instead of joy. There is real guilt in this situation.

But, Scripture teaches us that God is at work in our world despite our sin. As Joseph recognized in our lesson for today, God's Spirit is powerful enough to overcome our sin and bring new life and new possibilities even when it looks like things are hopeless. God is able to bring salvation and freedom into a situation that seems to offer only captivity and death.

Why was Joseph able to forgive his brothers? What they did to him was inexcusable. Why didn't Joseph just take revenge upon them for what they did?

Joseph was able to look at what happened to him in a larger context. Joseph was able to see a bigger picture. It wasn't just about him and his hurts and his needs nor was it just about his family and their petty squabbles. God was at work through it all and beyond it all for a greater good.

If we are to be the forgiving and loving people we are called to be in Christ Jesus, like Joseph, we too need to see the big picture.

Every family has a story of betrayal and hurt feelings. Every church has a story of disappointment and broken promises. The anger and recriminations will just keep bubbling along our whole life unless something happens to break up that vicious cycle.

That something is the recognition that it's not just about me. There's a bigger story here than just my story. There's something more important in the world than just what happens to me and mine.

Life is too short to spend it hating that brother who stole the money or that sister who has nothing to do with the family.

Life is too short to spend it worrying about small-minded terrorists or a spouse who has been unfaithful.

We need to see a bigger picture. There is more to life than just my life. God can and does redeem us in these times of trouble.

THE HEALING OF JOSEPH

Before Joseph met with his brothers, his heart was already being mended by the power of God's grace. After enduring a life of hardship, Joseph found himself in charge in Pharaoh's court. He was married and had two sons.

The first son he named Manasseh, which means, "making to forget." When this son was born, Joseph said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house."

Joseph then had a second son whom he named Ephraim, which means, "to be fruitful." Joseph said, "God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes."

Eventually Joseph got to the point in his life where he could see the grace of God redeeming the hurt in his life. I think all of us need to come that same point in our own lives.

We too need a child named Manasseh, a new birth that causes us to forget the pain of the past. We too need a child named Ephraim who reminds us that God can make us "fruitful" in the land of our misfortunes. Like Joseph, we too need an opportunity to go about that very painful process of forgiving our brothers and sisters and seeing through the tears of that reconciliation an even greater power and purpose.

I have heard people say that it is easy to trust God when things are going well. But, upon further reflection I think that's not true.

Many times when things are going well, we don't even think about God. It's during the tough times that we learn what the blessing of God really means. The salvation of God comes in the form of a cross.

CHRIST AND JOSEPH

For some commentators, the story of Joseph prefigures the story of Christ. There are some striking parallels.

Joseph, like Jesus was betrayed, and sold into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. He was thought to be dead, but then he was found alive by his brothers in Egypt. A story of despair turns into a story of salvation.

In the future God would take an even worse situation and bring about an even greater salvation. Jesus, God's own Son would be crucified, dead and buried. He was betrayed and killed by those he loved.

And yet his betrayal and death would open up the greatest hope the world had never known. Just when they thought he was dead and gone, the risen Jesus appeared to the disciples.

They learned that there was still hope even in the darkest hour.

NEVER, NEVER GIVE UP

Winston Churchill, right before he died in 1965 was asked to give the commencement address at a college. He was very old by that time and had to be helped to the podium. They say that he was so unsteady when he got up they weren't sure he would have strength enough to speak.

At last he raised the head that had called Britain back from the brink and said to those graduating seniors, "Never, never give up."

And with that he turned around and sat down. They say it is the only commencement address in history that's been remembered verbatim by everybody who heard it.

That's the message for today.
Never, never give up.

Why? God can take our messy, dysfunctional lives and use them for his glory. God can take your situation, bad as it may seem at the moment, and turn it into something incredibly good.

God can take a symbol of suffering and shame and turn it into the sign of salvation.

That's providence.

Do you believe broken families can be reconciled? Do you believe God can use evil to bring about good? Do you believe that even death is no match for the God revealed in Jesus?

I believe. I believe that God's power to save is stronger than all the destructive powers in our world. In fact, I'm betting my life on it, and I invite you to bet your life on that as well.

Amen.