

Genesis 44-45

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. ²And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³Joseph 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. ⁴Then 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. ⁵And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. ⁶For 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. ⁷God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. ⁸So 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. ⁹Hurry 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. ¹⁰You 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. ¹¹I 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." ¹²And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Today's text offers a moving scene of reconciliation. The climax of the story of Joseph contains high drama, contrition, powerful emotion. We witness the resolution of family events. Through jealousy and hatred toward Joseph, his brothers had sold him in to slavery in Egypt, but through fortuitous events he rises to the power in Egypt.

As Potiphar's slave, for the first in his life something was asked of him. He was given responsibilities and he began to flourish in ways he would have never flourished if had stayed with the pampering of his father. In fact, he was so effective he rose to be the head of Potiphar's household. Everything was going great, until Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him. When he resisted her, he is wrongly accused of being the perpetrator. He was taken out of Potiphar's household into prison. It seemed to be the absolute worst thing that could have happened. But God was still at work in the life of Joseph.

Joseph earned a reputation as the interpreter of dreams for Pharaoh's chief cupbearer and baker. When the Pharaoh was troubled by nightmares, someone remembered the young Hebrew in the jail. He was taken to Pharaoh and helped him understand that his dreams were saying that they were having 7 years of abundance but they should stockpile because 7 years of famine were coming. Pharaoh was so impressed with Joseph that he made him the number two official in all the Egyptian hierarchy. The

seven years of plenty are passed and now the seven years of famine are upon the land and the people. Egypt became the bread basket of the Mediterranean. Mean while, Jacob and sons, who were starving to death. Jacob sends his ten sons to Egypt to buy corn. The brothers are recognized by Joseph; but they do not recognize him.

Years have passed and Joseph has become a powerful advisor to Pharaoh. He has a virtual blank check in terms of political and economic leadership. Joseph treats them harshly, toying with their emotions. Joseph (in his position as an Egyptian ruler) has been manipulating his unsuspecting brothers. He accuses them of being spies, of theft. He throws them in jail for 3 days. Is Joseph playing mind games? practicing revenge? The brothers wonder, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen" (Gen 42:21). Though the brothers confess their egregious wrongs in Joseph's presence, they do not know that Joseph understands what they are saying, since he speaks to them through an interpreter.

When Joseph demands Simeon stay as a hostage, and demands that Benjamin, the youngest, be brought to Egypt, they are all the more convinced that God is pursuing them with retribution. Food is running out, and Jacob's family is in deep distress.

On return they are treated well, and assured that they are not thieves. They are even invited to dine with Joseph. However, in this last deception, Joseph frames Benjamin, for stealing his silver cup. Benjamin is innocent of any wrongdoing. Joseph claims him as a slave and offers to let the other brothers go free. Will the brothers sell him into slavery, just as they sold Joseph? Will they buy their own freedom at the expense of Jacob's remaining beloved son?

The turning point comes when Judah pleads with Joseph. Judah won't abandon Benjamin. He swore to their father, Jacob, that he would bring Benjamin back. He tells Joseph that their father has already lost one beloved son, and that if he loses another, he will die. Judah offers himself as a slave in place of Benjamin: How can I go back to my father if he is not with me? I fear to see my father's suffering." (44:33-34).

Judah and the brothers, have changed over time. Gone is the intense hatred they once held for the favored son of their father. There is no hint that they envy or hate Benjamin for the special place he holds in their father's heart. They bear the guilt of what they did to Joseph. Now, they have repented and are determined to save Benjamin. It is this change of heart, and the compassion they show for their elderly father, that moves Joseph to reveal himself. He sends the Egyptians away, speaking directly to his brothers: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" Joseph has to say again through their surprise and dismay, "I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into Egypt." Then he reassures them: "And now do not be distressed because you sold me; for God sent me before you to preserve life. It was not you who sent me here, but God".

This is a moment of realization for him. Joseph's forgiveness for his brothers, the proximity to his family, and the sincerity and emotion of Judah's speech overwhelms him. He can contain himself no longer, and wept loudly, embracing his brother,

Benjamin, kissing and weeping over his other brothers. Reconciliation, forgiveness, grace. He releases his anger toward his brothers, feeling gratitude and awe for God's hand at work in his life.

Joseph has grown emotionally and spiritually. Somehow he has conquered his own self-interest and narcissism. He reaches out to the brothers who once betrayed him. His response to adversity deepens his spiritual maturity. Joseph had choices; **he could have seen himself as a victim or sought vengeance. Instead, he widened his circle of care to include those whom had betrayed him.**

Joseph's words to his brothers also give us the theological lens through which to view his whole story. "God sent me before you to preserve life . . . It was not you who sent me here, but God." Joseph makes the same statement to his brothers years later, after their father's death: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today" (50:20).

Joseph does not attribute the brothers' sinful actions to God. "I am your brother Joseph, whom *you* sold into Egypt". Joseph affirms that God was able to use those sinful actions for God's own purposes. **The brothers devised evil, but God turned it to good.**

Walter Brueggemann suggests that "*Joseph takes a second hard look at his life. He is willing to trust a purpose for his life that is larger than his own horizon.*" His theological reflection is about God at work in his own life. Brueggemann writes of the "hiddenness" of God at work in our lives, the "*something playful and unresolved about our lives that warns us not to be too sure. The purposes of God may be at work among us in ways we do not even recognize.*" Brueggemann speaks of God's ability to act in ways that are mysterious, wondrous, and good. Joseph "*does a reversal from moving from resentment to an act of generosity, because he understands God has been at work well beyond him.*" Brueggemann imagines that Joseph says, "*I became aware that my life was more than the sum of my fears, my hates, and my loves. My life is larger than I imagined, and I decided to embrace the largeness that is God's gift for my life.*"

It would be easy to say that God, like some divine puppeteer, made the brothers do something evil in order to accomplish something good later on, but what kind of crazy-making theology is that? God actually CAUSES or PLANS bad things to happen so that God to accomplish some GREATER good. That would diminish our human freedom and responsibility. Joseph does remind his brothers – in case they've forgotten – that they sold him into slavery. I am much more likely to go to Romans 8:28, with the addition of the word eventually - All things work together for good - my insertion - eventually - for those who love God. It is the kind of theology that holds accountable those who committed wrongful, hurtful acts, AND trusts God to take the broken pieces of our lives to create something healing and whole and beautiful. A place where grace and forgiveness can emerge.

Barbara Brown Taylor says *God isn't a puppeteer, making things happen. God is more like an artist, "like one of those sculptors who can make art out of anything."* For this

kind of artist, "*Nothing is too bent to be used – not even tragedies, not even bad decisions, not even plain human meanness.*" Joseph is "a living work of art".

And the beauty of this lies in his exuberant forgiveness of brothers who resented him and showed him no mercy. When they had power, they ignored his pleas, but now Joseph is in power, he freely chooses reconciliation. When Joseph looks at his life, he no longer sees himself as a victim,: "*When he looked at his life, he did not see a series of senseless tragedies. He saw a lighted path...*" BBT

Cautionary word: "encouraging victims of any kind of abuse to see 'God's plan' in the abuse is insensitive & irresponsible pastoral care". We must be sensitive to the suffering of those who have been injured or damaged.

The larger picture is one of freely given forgiveness that seems to give Joseph as much freedom and joy as it gives his brothers relief (as forgiveness often does). Brueggeman says: "*When we live according to our fears and our hates, our lives become small and defensive, lacking the deep, joyous generosity of God.*" God's providence can lead us beyond ourselves to give and to forgive, to create life we would not have imagined"

There is a universal longing, a hunger in every soul for forgiveness; both to give and to receive it. **Ernest Hemingway** tells about a young man who wrongs his father and he runs away from home to the city of Madrid. The father misses his son & wants to be reconciled, so out of great love he takes out an ad in the Madrid newspaper, '*Paco, meet me at Hotel Montana, 12 noon Tuesday. All is forgiven. Papa.*' Paco is such a common name in Spain, that when the father went to the Hotel Montana the next day at noon there were 800 young men named Paco waiting for their fathers! Hemingway's story reminds us how desperate all of us are for forgiveness.

by John van de Laar

*In every place and every time, in every relationship and every interaction,
You are God.*

*You are God to the poor and to the wealthy, to the weak and to the
powerful;*

*You are God to the believer and to the doubter, to the religious and to the
atheist;*

*You are God to the courageous and to the fearful, to the fighter and to the
peacemaker;*

*You are God to the leader and to the follower, to the parent and to the
child;*

You are God to all, and Your grace and love extends to all.

*And while we may seek to keep You to ourselves,
while we may try to hoard Your blessings,*

*You have come to all, You are available to all,
and all who want You will find that You are there.*

*We praise You that our small self-interests are not enough to keep You
from being the great and all-embracing God that You are.*

