

## You Can't Pick Your Family

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Let us pray: O Lord our God, your Word is a lamp to our feet and a light to our path. Give us grace to receive your truth in faith and love, that we may be obedient to your will and live always for your glory; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Our passage from Genesis 45 comes at the *end* of the Joseph narrative. We've skipped to the big reveal, passed by the bulk of the drama of the account of Jacob and his sons. Time constraints often leave us unable to share these full stories from the Bible...so you'll have to make do with my nuts-and-bolts seriously abridged version of the Joseph narrative. I highly recommend a re-reading of Genesis 37-45 for anyone who is able. It is hard to understand the incredibility of the forgiveness that is found in the 45<sup>th</sup> chapter without revealing the story of that which must be forgiven as it happens prior to the brother's reunion.

Many of you may recall that Jacob (Joseph's father) was married to Leah, but really loved her sister Rachel, to whom he was married as well. Rachel had troubles conceiving but eventually had Joseph, who subsequently became Jacob's favorite son. Mock political personality and comedian Stephen Colbert, author of the book "I am America, and So Can You!" gives the following advice among his "tips on raising a family": "Tip #2: There can be only one. No matter how many kids you have, you need to *pick a favorite*. It's going to happen on its own, but it'll happen faster if you and your spouse have at least debated the issue. The important thing is not to tell any of your kids who the favorite is—just let them know you have one. That's a guessing game that will keep them occupied and quiet on many a road trip." If only Colbert had been around to give such "expert" advice to Jacob, who chose his favorites and then made it painfully obvious who they were.

Jacob gave Joseph the infamous coat of many colors—a robe akin to that of royalty, as a sign of his affection. The other boys were none too pleased. Then Joseph goes and has a dream which he interprets to mean that he will eventually rule over his siblings. Then he tells them of his dream that the sun, moon, and stars will bow down to him! Jealous and angry, they finally decided that something had to be done. Together, they plot Joseph's demise, and though some of them had wanted to kill him, his brother Reuben was able to convince the other boys not to spill Joseph's blood. They decide to leave him in a ditch, but then Judah has an even better idea—why not profit from Joseph's disappearance? He and some of the other brothers sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites, which dismays Reuben, who was hoping to rescue Joseph from the ditch after his brothers went home. But Joseph is sold, and the boys bring his torn coat, covered in goat's blood, to their father. He was eventually sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officers in Egypt.

Joseph rises up in Potiphar's esteem quickly...eventually becoming in charge of his household affairs. Unfortunately for Joseph, Potiphar's wife wants to become one of the "household affairs" for which Joseph is responsible. After all, it is written that Joseph was incredibly good-looking. Joseph, being a man of integrity, refuses the come-ons of Potiphar's wife. She cries wolf, accusing him of assaulting her...and Potiphar throws Joseph in jail. Joseph proceeds to accurately interpret dreams for his fellow prisoners and becomes ingratiated to the head of the jail. He basically gets to run the jail from the inside. (Begging the question...is Joseph *everyone's favorite*?) When Pharaoh has dreams he needs interpreted, Joseph is recommended. Joseph predicts that there will be seven years of great harvest in the land and seven years of famine. Pharaoh promotes Joseph, whose predictions eventually come to pass. Egypt is in good shape when the famine comes, having stored up grain during their time of plenty. Folks from everywhere else come to Egypt to try to get food...including Joseph's long lost brothers...not realizing that Joseph is alive and well and quite powerful in the region. Joseph pretends he doesn't speak their language and basically gives them the run around (some would call his actions a little passive aggressive, but apparently not the authors of Genesis...he must have been their favorite too).

He is very emotional during his time with them, though he shields his emotions along with his identity. Finally, he asks them to bring their younger brother Benjamin (daddy's new favorite) to him. When they return with Ben, Joseph throws them a feast (though he doesn't attend) and then sends them on their way...but frames Benjamin by putting a special silver cup in his pack and having the guards "discover" it. They are all brought back to the palace where Joseph confronts them, accusing Benjamin of theft and insisting that he remain in Egypt. His brother Judah offers the other brothers up as slaves. But Joseph only wants Benjamin. Now they will have to decide what to do—will they once again sacrifice their father's favorite son? Fortunately, they seem to have grown up a bit in the twenty-something years that have elapsed between leaving Joe in the pit and unknowingly begging him for food and their lives. They emotionally

explain that if Benjamin doesn't leave with them, their father will surely die of a broken heart. They pass Joseph's test and we find ourselves at Genesis 45, when Joseph reveals himself and acts with love and forgiveness toward his brothers.

Our opening Psalm taken from the lectionary read, "How very good and pleasant it is when families live together in unity!" A more cynical psalmist might have written: "How very good and pleasant...and rare it is when families live together in unity!" In fact, I know not of a family that in its present and past has lived in total unity. Family is truly a gift from God, but that does not mean that living in unity comes without its challenges. In our family lives we live out some of the most painful experiences of the human condition, painful because we have certain expectations of what family is "supposed" to be like. Painful, because we fail so often to meet those expectations. Who among us does not have familial relationships we wish had worked out differently? After all, how can a family be perfect if no human is? Joseph's story magnifies this familial strife...he who experienced the love and nurturing of his father is at the same time resented and even hated by his own brothers. He is no perfect sibling either—he seems incapable of keeping an inner monologue when it comes to dream interpretation. But for his imperfections, he suffers great betrayal, and lives for years without any connection to the family and life that defined his being for so long.

Once the act of betrayal has been committed and the rest of Jacob's sons return to him with the shreds of a blood-stained coat, Reuben declares to his father that "the boy is *einenu*," or, "the boy is gone." Literally, it means, "the boy is *not*." In this act of violence and treachery, Joseph's identity is lost. Dr. Avivah Zornberg, a Jewish scholar and professor of Torah and Midrash, writes: "...Joseph is *einenu*, and learns to use the energy of his disappearance to reconstitute his dispersed identity. For Joseph is lost, both to his family and to himself."<sup>i</sup> His reality is inexorably altered, and he must reconstruct a new reality. So too must his family.

Although their lives are altered, their lives do continue. Joseph, with a few exceptions, does very well for himself in Egypt. As he acclimates to his new life, he gets down to the business of forgetting his past. He even names his children Manasseh and Ephraim, which translated mean: "For God has made me forget completely my hardship and my parental home," and "God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction." Not so subtle references to his painful familial past. (And all we could come up with was "William" or "President Awesome".) Much time passes, and Joseph has made for himself a new life; a life completely separate from that of his family of origin. And then comes the great famine, which brings his brothers into his life once again. And it seems that all that hard work of forgetting was really ineffective. All it takes is one chance encounter with his brothers to renew his sense of utter loss. He weeps throughout the narrative as the pains he had "forgotten" resurface.

Joseph takes his time in his self-revelation. He does not immediately greet them at the palace steps, offering love and forgiveness. He wants to make sure they have changed. At least, that's what his actions indicate up until the moment of his revealing. And though his brothers *do* seem to have changed over the years, I do not believe it was finally *their doing* that lead Joseph to an open-armed forgiveness. In the end we see Joseph overwhelmed with emotion, having born the pain of familial loss and betrayal for over two decades, he can no longer bare separation from his brothers. He is compelled to renew their relationship, moved by something seemingly beyond his control, he desires to be known once again. "I am Joseph."

It is an incredible story up to this point, and becomes even more incredible as Joseph reveals to his brothers (and perhaps to himself) that all is forgiven. For anyone who has struggled with the notion of forgiveness or struggled to accept forgiveness, this is an unbelievable act of graciousness. After all, forgiving is something that many of us are just not ready to do. In my reading this week, I came across a story from 16<sup>th</sup> century church council records from Switzerland which "tell of a man who pretended that he could not remember the Lord's Prayer because he knew that if he said it he would have to forgive the merchant who had cheated him. This was something he had no intention of doing!" (Practicing Our Faith, 134) Joseph's brothers cheated him of the life he once expected...robbed him of his very identity...and still we find him here weeping and forgiving. For many of us, Joseph is forgiving what is unforgivable.

French philosopher Jacques Derrida has an interesting insight to offer concerning the forgiveness of the unforgivable. He writes, "In order to approach now the very concept of forgiveness, logic and common sense agree for once with paradox: it is necessary, it seems to begin from the fact that, yes, there is the unforgivable. Is this not, in truth, the only thing to forgive? The only thing that *calls* for forgiveness? .... One cannot, or should not, forgive; there is only forgiveness, if there is any, where there is the unforgivable. That is to say that forgiveness must announce itself as impossibility itself."<sup>ii</sup> But how does Joseph forgive the unforgivable??? Avivah Zornberg explains, "From the human perspective, Joseph was *einenu*, he had ceased to be in the line of sight. From God's perspective, he had been just where

he was meant to be, swallowed up, giving and saving life. This is Joseph's therapeutic narrative, full of expressions of relationship, unblinking of the basic facts of the distance between 'you' and 'me,' but allowing God to take up the slack of that distance. Out of the brokenness has come a rethinking of the past, a redeeming of the past, a hope for wholeness in the house of Jacob."<sup>iii</sup> It is a hope for wholeness that Jacob is open to in faith.

It seems that in the end, their reconciliation had a lot more to do with God than it had to do with who did what, or who was sorry for what, or who got over what. "And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life," Joseph assures them. It is as if in saying it he actually starts believing it. Joseph sees himself as having lived out God's will. His reconciliation to his brothers begins with his love for God.

Friends and families, in our reconciliation to one another we are indeed reconciled to God. Our acts of forgiveness which may seem utterly non-sensical given the evidence at hand are truly acts of divine proportion. All our lives may we struggle toward this sort of reconciliation together, leaving space for God to enter in, to un-harden our hearts, and when we need it most, may we even find forgiveness for ourselves.

I leave you with the following poem from Ann Weems, taken from her book, "Family Faith Stories."

Somewhere between the hurt and the heart  
must come the decision  
to reject  
or cling to  
the faith.

Somewhere among the Why me?'s and the anger  
and the screaming No!'s and the soft incessant  
sobbing,

Somewhere in the aching persistent pain  
and the hopeless helpless nights,

Somewhere between the loud horror of what has  
happened  
and the quiet terror of silence  
comes

A turning away  
or a reaching out.

Somewhere between power and powerlessness  
comes  
the covenant cry  
and you either answer or you don't  
and you either live or you die.

"Therefore choose life,  
that you and your descendants may live."<sup>iv</sup>

Somewhere between the hurt and the heart, Joseph lets God in...and finds himself home again.

May the spirit of reconciliation be in all of our hearts this day. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Zornberg, Avivah. *Genesis: The Beginning of Desire*, p. 307.

<sup>ii</sup> Derrida, Jacques. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 32-33.

<sup>iii</sup> Zornberg, 311.

<sup>iv</sup> Weems, Anne. *Family Faith Stories*, p. 50.