

August 10, 2008 13th Sunday After Pentecost

Sermon: A Family Reunion

Let's begin by filling in the story of this family reunion. As you heard in this morning's reading, bratty little brother Joseph was given his comeuppance by his older brothers, who were sick of hearing about his dreams. The dreams seemed to indicate Joseph would eventually rule over his whole family. They were also threatened by the favouritism father Jacob showed Joseph: remember his famous coat of many colours – or coat with long sleeves? So the brothers, in a fit of jealousy, gang up on him and throw him down a dry well. Instead of leaving him there to die, they sell him to some Ishmaelite traders, who are on their way to Egypt. Joseph is sold as a slave, and eventually ends up in the household of Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh's court. Slaves in Egypt can rise to surprising levels of responsibility, and Joseph ends up as head of Potiphar's household. Unfortunately, Potiphar's wife has a wandering eye, and when Joseph rejects her advances, she has him locked up for attempted rape.

But then into the prison come two new prisoners who are members of the royal household – a baker and a cup-bearer who got on the wrong side of Pharaoh. They have dreams, which Joseph successfully interprets. A couple of years later, Joseph's reputation reaches Pharaoh, who's been having some strange dreams of his own. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams, warning him that seven years of good crops will be followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh is so impressed, he has Joseph freed, and puts him in charge of managing the food stores to get Egypt through the famine. So Joseph goes from favoured son, to miserable slave, to second-in-command in Egypt.

Meanwhile, his family is starting to feel the effects of the crop shortages all around the Mediterranean, and the brothers are sent to Egypt to secure food – all except Benjamin, Joseph's full brother, who is now extra precious to father Jacob, having lost Joseph. When the ten half-brothers come before Joseph, he realizes they are in his power, and tests them in various ways, even forcing them to send for Benjamin to come to Egypt. The whole story's well-worth reading, so when you get home take a look at these chapters in Genesis: 37 through 49. Our story today picks up when Joseph has satisfied himself that his brothers regret their actions toward him, and have become better men. Joseph now stands before his brothers, who do not know who this man is. All they know is that he holds the power of life and death over them.

Joseph's brothers: they were his own flesh and blood. But they were also the ones who had abused and betrayed him. He should hate and punish them for what they had done, but he couldn't. We can imagine that, in spite of himself, Joseph wanted nothing in the world more than to be loved once more by his family – to know what it was to have the love and support of his family to bear him up. Through all the years of loneliness, and fear, and pain, he must have longed at times for his family, even though he must have cursed his brothers for what they had done. Ralph Milton imagines what that scene might have been like. [Rumours]

"Get out of here," Joseph shouted through his tears to all the Egyptians in the room. "Get out. I want to be alone with these men."

Then he turned on his brothers. "I am Joseph. I am your brother. Do you remember me? Is father still alive?"

The men dropped to the ground, terrified. Only Judah managed to raise his head enough to nod a yes to Joseph's plea about his father.

Again the tears. Joseph knew how much he wanted to be loved, to be accepted by these men, his brothers, and yet his anger at them boiled inside.

"It's all right, my brothers." In his need, Joseph covered up his anger. "God arranged it all. God knew there'd be a famine in the land, and God put me here in the Egyptian court so I could take care of you and my father and our whole tribe. So it wasn't your fault, you see!" Out of his desperate need, Joseph denied his anger and told the pious lie.

Joseph walked up to Benjamin, his youngest brother and embraced him. "Ben, Ben. It is so good to see you. How is Dad? Tell me how my father is?"

Benjamin swallowed hard. "He's fine. Just fine."

"Tell Dad that I'm alive. I'm O.K. And tell him that I've done OK. Tell him I'm in charge of just about everything here, that I'm second-in-command to Pharaoh. Tell him that, will you Ben?"

Ben nodded, still dazed. Joseph wondered why he'd said that. Why was it so important to have his Dad know of his success?

It took days before Joseph and his brothers cut through years of fear and anger and repression to really talk with each other. And one day, Joseph found again the anger he had hidden, enough that he could shout his rage. "Why would you do such a terrible thing?" For which there was, of course, no longer any answer.

Then one day there was confession. One by one the brothers, Joseph too, found words to name their sins. One by one they asked forgiveness from each other and from God. One by one they vowed to purge their lives of jealousy and greed that brought them to such deeds.

Now the tears flowed freely. And sometimes laughter too, as brothers saw each other now as fragile, lonely men who needed more than anything the care and love that only they could give each other.

"The God of our ancestors did not lead us to abuse and to betray you, Joseph," Judah said one day. "Our God is a just and loving God, and would never will such things. But God has used our weakness and our sin and through it has brought life to the land of Egypt and to our father's clan. Thanks be to God."

"Thanks be to God," repeated Joseph and his brothers.

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One of the reasons this story has such power is because we know it to be true: perhaps in a historical sense, but more importantly, as an echo of the troubles that stir up our families and our friendships and leave us hurting. I remember having a rather heated discussion with one of my dearest friends. It was while we were in a car, driving, and you know what that's like. Have you ever wanted to just stop the car and get out and away from each other? It was one of those fights. When we realized the argument was going nowhere, and we were stuck in a car together for the next two hours, we decided to just let it be for awhile. I turned on the music, and my friend decided to take a nap. When we got to our destination, we were polite but quiet. We sat in the silence for a while, and then my friend started talking – and I responded – and we were able to talk it out. Each of us apologized for our behaviour. I made the comment that he'd seen more of my darker side than most; his reply was that that's the nature of close relationships. And isn't that true?

Because we are comfortable with each other, we let our close friends and family see parts of ourselves that others never get to see. Most of the time, that's a good thing; but sometimes it means that we grow careless or reckless in our behaviour toward each other, and the wounds dealt by such behaviour are deeper, because we care more. As my friend said, the good thing is that because we care more, we are also more ready to forgive. In a strong relationship, that is true. The challenge is, as Christian people, to live out that forgiveness daily – and not just with those to whom we are close, but with all the people with whom we interact.

Someone once said that the teaching of forgiveness is a unique and valuable contribution Christianity can make to the world. Jesus died on a cross in mortal agony: yet he managed to gasp out the words, "Father, forgive them". An article I read pointed out that there is a dangerous notion in our present society that making people pay for the wrongs they have done will bring closure to their victims. What folk call "closure" is actually thinly cloaked revenge. Revenge doesn't solve anything: it simply feeds the cycle of wrong. In the play, "Fiddler on the Roof", some young Jewish men want to pay the Cossacks back for the destruction they've caused at a wedding. They quote the Bible: "An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth". To which Tevye replies: "And soon all the world will be blind and toothless."

The only thing that will resolve the hurt and heal the wounds between people is forgiveness. Ralph Milton, who used to do a lot of work with men's groups wrote this: "It seemed to be one of the hardest things to sort out for these men – most of whom were there because their wives or girlfriends or partners had kicked them out. And it often seemed necessary for each of them to have a turn at yelling, swearing and threatening revenge. Most of them eventually got to the point where they realized that the revenge, the [so-called] "closure" they wanted, would give them nothing at all.

What they needed to work on was forgiveness. And that was hard for all of them. It was hard to forgive the other person who had [supposedly] "caused" all the pain. It was especially hard for them to forgive themselves for having really loused up the relationship. It was hard for them to imagine that God would forgive them.

The toughest part of the story of Joseph and his brothers, was the very last phrase in this weeks' reading: ".and then his brothers talked with him." Many – maybe most – guys are running scared of that kind of talking. But that's what it takes.

Some of the guys in those groups – not all, and probably not even most of them – found healing. Closure. A new life. A sense of hope. Courage to undertake the long, slow process of rebuilding a relationship.”

What Ralph Milton applies to men, applies to women, too. Beginning the conversation isn't easy – and I was deeply grateful to my friend for taking that first step. Forgiveness is hard: forgiving others, forgiving ourselves, accepting God's forgiveness. But it is the only thing that can heal the wounds that lie between people. There have been many books written recently about forgiveness – what it is, and how to go about it, and I'm going to talk more about it in a few weeks. But we begin with this: the knowledge that we too, are in need of forgiveness. That we are flawed; that we hold responsibility for hurting others; that we fall short, maybe even on a daily basis, of the best we can be. We lose our patience with our kids, gossip about our neighbours, take our spouses for granted, neglect our parents, and betray our friends' confidences. We all do it. More, we neglect our relationship with God. We fail to live in God's way. We don't talk to God or listen to what God has to say to us. We put God way down our priority list. But despite all of this, we are forgiven. A passage in the Psalms says “If you should count our iniquities, who could stand? But there is forgiveness in you.” Because we have been forgiven, we can begin to forgive others. It's a hard road, but a necessary one.

How would the story of Joseph have ended if he had had his brothers executed or imprisoned? If he had turned his back on the family which had caused him so much pain? If the family of Jacob, the people of Israel, had been left to starve in Canaan? That might have been the end of the Biblical story as we know it. But for the people of Israel, Joseph became a saviour, a strong leader who was both compassionate and wise, to see them through one of the most difficult times in their history. Forgiveness, the story of Joseph tells us, does not make a man weak: it makes him strong. The prayer Jesus taught says: “Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who sin against us.” A man or woman who can forgive is a man or woman who truly walks in the wisdom of God. As we pray the Lord's Prayer together later on in the service, I hope that each one of us can renew our intention to live out our faith as a forgiving and forgiven people. Amen.