

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

11th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Genesis 45:1-15

Title: “We Live. We Love: Reconciled”

This last week I was at the monthly board of directors meeting of the Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center. I serve as the secretary of the board. One of our board members shared a promotional media presentation he was putting together with Dr. McIlvenna, the Executive Director, and in that presentation he put together a slide that caught my attention. Here it is:



You can see the headlines. All of them taken from articles Mark found in recent on-line pieces about life in the U.S. All of them—and these are just a few—have to do with the negative, conflicts, pain. Mark did this to reveal that there is a great need for services like Fresh Aire Samaritan Counseling Center to bring healing and growth to a world so fraught with people hurting people. The God known in Jesus Christ seeks healing--wants healing--for those who hurt.

We all know that while God created the world and called it very good, the world can be a harsh place. We do get hurt, some more than others. Some deeper than others. Some experience discrimination in ways others do not. Some experience hate in ways others do not. Some are slammed time and time again by violence against them in ways that leave hidden scars and some that are not so hidden. Some experience betrayals that leave them feeling crushed. Others experience personal conflicts that leave them broken in ways that cannot always be seen. In such a world, where is God in all of this? Where is God when we and the people we love get hurt?

This morning we conclude the series “We live. We love.” And it’s Joseph who concludes it. We’ve been spending time in the rich stories of Genesis, following this dysfunctional family of God from Esau and his deceiving brother, Jacob to Joseph and his brothers who find themselves deceiving the deceiver himself when the brothers sell Joseph into slavery to Egypt. It’s been years since the boys deceived their father, Jacob. Joseph was presumed dead by Jacob--the bloody, torn robe provided the evidence, and Jacob swallowed it hook, line and sinker. Joseph was dead. Jacob believed it, and it plunged him into deep grief. Talk about experiencing pain in his life.

It’s the same pain experienced by my aunt whose funeral I’ll be attending on Tuesday in Oscoda. Aunt Donna was very close to her 6 children. They have all been very tight as a family, so when she watched 4 of her grandsons’ coffins lowered into their graves, it hurt all of them in ways that can’t be measured. Unlike Jacob’s story, there was no deception in those deaths, but the pain of Jacob was known by my cousins and my aunt when those four young men died. Sometimes life just isn’t fair and suffering visits in ways undeserved and unexpected.

Jacob believed his son Joseph was dead. Only he wasn’t. After he was taken to Egypt by the traders to whom his brothers had sold him, Joseph did well. His story is filled with twists and turns in Egypt but in the end, he finds himself entrusted by the pharaoh himself. Joseph has extraordinary skills such that the ruler of the land recognized his unique abilities. God gives Joseph the gift of dream interpretation, and Joseph uses that gift to prepare the nation for a famine he sees coming in pharaoh’s dreams. Beyond the ability to interpret dreams that God gives him, Joseph is so otherwise gifted that he becomes the chief administrator for an entire nation, trusted completely by the pharaoh himself.

Joseph was sold into slavery as a strapping 17 year old, dragged to Egypt by a caravan of traders. Now he’s a grown man in charge of administrating the affairs of the country. He’s the Secretary of Agriculture of all of Egypt, maybe the Secretary of the Treasury, too. Joseph is a man of stature, a man of power.

So when his brothers show up to buy grain as a result of the extended draught that has plunged people into hunger, Joseph has the power to take revenge on those brothers who sold him when he was 17. When they come looking to buy grain, he knows who they are but he himself is dressed as an Egyptian. They don’t see him but he sees them and knows them. He decides not to tell them who he is right away. Instead, sends them back to their father with their purchased grain but has their money with which they purchased the grain back into the grain sacks, so it appears they have received the grain for free. It leaves them uneasy because they could be accused of theft. Of course, they are innocent. While Joseph hasn’t exacted revenge

for what they did to him, he doesn't let them off the hook either.

When they are all once again hungry, Jacob sends them back for more grain but this time with double the money so they can confess that they had somehow received what they paid the first time and want to make it right but then to again purchase more grain to keep them from starvation. This time Joseph cranks it up a notch and tells them because of what they've done, they will need to bring back their little brother, Benjamin. As collateral, Joseph keeps one of the other brothers in prison until they return with Benjamin.

When the remaining free brothers return home and tell their father, Jacob, what Joseph said, he will not allow them to take Benjamin and return to Egypt. He says he will die of grief. He says he can't do it. He says this was too much to ask.

And so they wait...until once again they run out of food and Jacob finally, reluctantly relents and allows Benjamin to go to Egypt with the brothers.

All the while Joseph still does not reveal his true identity. And when Benjamin returns with his brothers, Joseph, still doesn't tell them who he is. He wines them and dines them and lavishes food aplenty on his brother Benjamin who is his only biological brother. When it is time for them to return to Jacob, Joseph has his personal cup planted in Benjamin's sack of grain, setting him up for a crime the boy did not commit.

Joseph could have done worse, of course, but he does play games with his brothers. Maybe he needed to do so. Maybe when so deeply hurt, he needed some kind of revenge and this kind of manipulation of his brothers satisfied something in Joseph. I don't know but clearly Joseph does not come clean in a way that reflects a complete and immediate forgiveness.

Benjamin is caught with the cup and they are all hauled back to appear before Joseph at which point Joseph says Benjamin must remain with him as a result of his theft. But one of the older brothers, Judah, takes Joseph aside and tells him why that can't happen. He tells him about Jacob, their father, and how Jacob told them all that he could not allow Benjamin to go, that if Benjamin should die then he too would die, that their lives were bound up together. He reported that Benjamin's only biological brother was dead—at least he thought he was. He tells Joseph finally: "Please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father." (Genesis 44:33-34).

Now, Joseph can no longer contain himself. Now, he cannot hold back. Now, he needed time alone with his brothers. He sends everyone else but his brothers out of the room. He was so overcome with emotion, so intense was his crying—shoulder-heaving- almost-screaming-kind-of-crying—that people next door could hear. It's like the screaming I've heard from neighbors when the husband and wife are arguing, only it's just Joseph, allowing all the pain from his brother's decades old betrayal to finally be released.

Have you ever been in such a place in which the pain you've experienced just pours out, when something in you opens up and you just can't turn off the tears? They just come!

Joseph was overwhelmed with such emotion. His brothers stand around not knowing what all this emotion is about. It's like people who become very uncomfortable when someone else is crying uncontrollably. We don't see it often--probably not often enough-- because such crying can be and often is seen—unfortunately--as weakness. Yet, Joseph, one of the most powerful men in that place and time, weeps with such intensity that even the neighbors can hear.

When he finally regains control, Joseph offers the big reveal: "I am your brother, Joseph."

Is my father still alive?"

But this is like bumping into my friend, Bruce Hatch, who died 15 years ago this October. Like my friend Bruce, Joseph was dead—at least in their minds. So stunned they couldn't speak. So shocked they couldn't answer. Joseph tries again:

"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".

Joseph reinterprets what has happened to him. He found hope and meaning in his suffering. He found God present with him as he looks back on his life and sees the bigger picture. Seeing the bigger picture, Joseph was able to forgive his brothers.

As I was thinking about this response of Joseph, this gift of Joseph to see God active even in his sufferings, Hannah Erwin posted something to her Facebook page. We have a slide of her post. Hannah wrote:



Duane M. Harris shared Hannah Erwin's post. Yesterday at 12:58pm

Great theology from one of our students!

Hannah Erwin Yesterday at 11:46am

I'm starting to think that God is like Google maps. If you take a wrong turn he reroutes you..

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Hannah Erwin

“God is like Google maps. If you take a wrong turn he reroutes you...” That’s great theology, Hannah! God doesn’t give up on us when we make wrong turns. God continues to work in our lives in ways that seeks our healing and growth. God stays with us and uses our experiences to guide us to something better.

It might also be said as I think Joseph says it: “If you suffer at the hands of others, God

can also reroute you in ways that reveal that even suffering can lead to greater things for our lives and the lives of others.” Again, God does not abandon us to our suffering. God does not leave us there in the pain, but rather God will use our experiences of suffering to bring healing and power and growth.

Joseph was able to see God at work in the bigger picture. Joseph was able to ultimately forgive his brothers for their betrayal as a result of realizing that even out of their betrayal God was able to bring something good.

Reflecting on Joseph’s faith interpretation one pastor wrote:

Could God be present in our response to the diagnosis of cancer? Could God inspire us to leave an abusive marriage, leaving ourselves economically insecure, to seek a better future for us and our children? Could God enable us to make a difficult, indeed painful, decision with hope that something much better is on the horizon? ...God’s providence is never abstract, but concrete and contextual. God’s providence occurs in the challenges of life and real situations, rather than an ideal world with no obstructions to goodness.

What about you? Can you look back on your life and find places in which you’ve suffered and later see that in some way God was able to use that suffering for good? Can you find God moments in which it is clear that God did not abandon you? Can you find reconciliation with the pain you’ve suffered knowing that even there God was with you guiding, leading, holding? Like Joseph, can you see then, the way in which forgiveness plays a role in bringing reconciliation to our experiences of suffering? Notice that Joseph doesn’t forget what his brothers did to him—he didn’t forget!--but he did find a way to overcome any bitterness in his own heart. He did find reconciliation in his own heart. That’s what forgiveness does.

Our next hymn this morning is one that is not so familiar. I doubt it would make it to your top 10 hymns but it has something to say about forgiveness that is worthy of our voices. It’s number 390 and I invite you to turn there. The first verse uses the Lord’s Prayer request that we be forgiven as we forgive and that we need God’s grace in order to really live this way. In verse two, the prayer speaks of the “unforgiving heart that broods on wrongs and will not let old bitterness depart.” This was not ultimately Joseph’s heart. Joseph’s interpretation of the bigger picture and God’s part in it gave him the strength he needed for God’s pardon to reach and bless the unforgiving heart in himself. Verse 3 we hear gratitude for the gift of Christ’s gift on the cross, Jesus who gave the ultimate gift and how much we owe him as a result of that profound gift of life. And finally verse 4 concludes the prayer asking God to cleanse us and rid our hearts of resentments so that we will experience the kind of love that binds us together and empowers us to live our lives in ways that spread God’s peace.