

Genesis 45:3-15

Epiphany 7C + February 27, 2019
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
The Resurrection of Joseph

The Word of the Lord from Genesis 45:7-8: Joseph said, "God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

How might you respond to this chapter in the life of Joseph? It's a powerful story. He's the youngest of twelve sons, his father Jacob's favorite of the bunch. As a promising young man, he's roughed up by his brothers, who then fake his death and sell him into slavery. He becomes a slave in Egypt, in the household of Potiphar, where he stands out and is appointed household manager; but when he refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife, she accuses him of attempted rape and he's thrown into prison. After a long stretch of time, he's pretty much running the jail on behalf of the warden; and eventually, Pharaoh hears that he is able to interpret dreams and summons him. Joseph interprets Pharaoh's dreams correctly about upcoming years of plenty and famine; and suddenly he's made second-in-command of Egypt, specifically charged with storing grain for the hungry years to come.

When famine strikes, it spreads far beyond Egypt; and soon, many are traveling from all over to purchase food from the Egyptians. Among them are Joseph's brothers.

Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. You were robbed of years when your brothers sold you to be rid of you. If they hadn't done so, you wouldn't have had to endure the slavery, the false rape accusation, the imprisonment, the shame. Your brothers have done you grievous harm, taken what they can't give back. Now, in Genesis 45, they have no idea that the powerful ruler in front of them is you. What's more, they are currently in your home and they are at your mercy.

No wonder that, when you say, "I am Joseph!", they are dismayed. This scene is ripe for vengeance. Joseph has the upper hand: he can kill them, or he can take years to make them wish he would.

What does Joseph do? He forgives them. He doesn't hold the past against them. Instead, he tells them the most remarkable thing. He says, "Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. ... God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God."

"It was not you who sent me here, but God." Joseph isn't mad at his brothers. He isn't mad at God, either. By faith – and this is faith doing the talking – Joseph knows that the Lord often works through trouble, suffering, humiliation and setback in order to accomplish His will. Joseph would have had no idea what the Lord was up to when he was marched down to Egypt, or when he was a slave to Potiphar, or when he was imprisoned for years; throughout those times, he would have had to trust in the Lord despite everything he could see. Now, looking back, he sees that the Lord has worked all things to save him and his extended family from starvation; and soon he will also say to his brothers, "You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today" (Gen. 50:20).

It really is an incredible story of forgiveness. So how might you respond to it?

I would hope that part of the response is some guilt and shame. Frankly, it is so easy to get bent out of shape over such little things. Someone offends you and you react in anger, or bear a grudge, or delight in their comeuppance, or decide you will never speak to them again. It's a reaction of pride, and pride always does its best to injure faith. Here, pride screams at you that you're so important that God would never permit you to be offended as part of His plan, would He?

Sometimes the offenses are tiny, sometimes they are well-deserved, and yet you are not prone to say, "God may indeed be using this for the good of many, and so I will suffer the offense and I will forgive." No, the go-to phrases of the sinful nature tend to be something like, "I deserve to be treated better than this!" I think you'll find that difficult to prove that from Scripture.

Hopefully, the example of Joseph stands as a corrective. If Joseph could forgive his brothers for ruining his life for so long, surely you can do a better job of forgiving those who hurt you. He did so by faith – the same faith that God has given you. If anything, your faith is at an advantage: Joseph was trusting in the promised Savior who would come 2,000 years later, and about whom he knew very little in a time before the first books of the Old Testament were written. You, on the other hand, trust in the Savior who has come, died and is risen again and who is revealed throughout the Scriptures.

Surely, then, Joseph stands as a great example of how you ought to live and forgive others.

But that is not enough, for we are still only talking about the law. You hear relevant law from Jesus in tonight's gospel lesson as He said things like, "But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you" (Lk. 6:27-28). As one with ears to hear, you rightly confess that you do not forgive as freely as you ought. As one who trusts in Christ, you see Joseph's example as a good one to follow. As you set out to forgive more intentionally, you might even do better. But you've still got your limits, and it won't come naturally: you'll still have to work to forgive other people. If it's you working, it's still law. If it's you trying your hardest, it's not good enough.

That's why you rejoice that Joseph isn't just a great example. He's a type of Christ. He's a young shepherd who is gotten rid of – and apparently sacrificed – by his brothers simply because they don't want him around. They presume him dead and gone. In Genesis 45, they discover that he lives – in their minds, it might as well be that he has risen from the dead. They are at his mercy: Joseph can make them pay dearly for their sin; but instead he forgives them and says that God has used their evil for good.

Two thousand years later, the Good Shepherd comes to visit His people, the descendants of Joseph's brothers. They get rid of Him – put Him to death on a cross – because He's the Father's beloved Son and they do not want Him around. Three days later, Jesus is risen from the dead. But He is not back for vengeance: He returns to give grace and life for all who believe. Where there could be no greater evil than man putting God to death, God uses it for good: He dies for their redemption.

He dies for your redemption.

Now we've got some gospel in this story. See, Joseph didn't forgive because he was a great man. Joseph forgave because he was a penitent sinner. Confessing his sins, he trusted that the Lord forgave him. With forgiveness, the Lord strengthened Joseph's faith to trust in what he could not see – in spite of what he could! By faith, Joseph trusted that the Lord was at work in his suffering; and by faith, he forgave his brothers for the evil they had done.

Will you forgive others, even enemies and those who hate you? You should, for you have been forgiven so much by the Lord who suffered on the cross for you. While you were yet a sinner, He died for you; and by His grace, He has transformed you from His enemy to a beloved child. Therefore, the key to forgiving others is not for you to be great and strong. The key is for you to be repentant. Confess your

sins, including your pride, anger, grudges, bitterness, resentment and everything else that gets in the way of forgiveness. Be forgiven for these sins – know that Christ has died for them all. With that forgiveness, the Lord is working to strengthen your faith; and by that faith, you can trust that the Lord is working all things for good – even when those things are bad, even when those things are evil. When, by faith, you trust that the Lord is working all things for your good, then you see that even your enemies are His instruments under His power.

When you see that God uses even your enemies for your good, that is when you find yourself saying to your enemies, "I forgive you."

In reality, then, the problem is not just that you harbor anger towards enemies. It is also that you doubt that God is using evil for your good. (Keep that in mind, by the way, the next time that some politician does something that dramatically increases your blood pressure.)

What happens the next time you don't want to forgive someone? You repent and confess again, and the Lord continues to forgive and strengthen your faith. If He uses evil for good, He can use your failure to make you trust less in you and more in Christ; and that is a very good thing.

My friends, forgive others. Remember Joseph, and remember how God uses evil for good. Most of all, remember Christ and rejoice. For though the world meant it for evil, His death was for your good. For, risen again, He declares to you, "I have shed My blood and died for your redemption; and therefore I forgive you all of your sins."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen