

“So it was not you who sent me here, but God...”

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Matthew 15:21-28; Genesis 45:1-15

(For the inspiration for this sermon, I am indebted to Walter Brueggemann’s narrative exposition of Genesis 45:1-15 in his *Interpretation* commentary series *Genesis*, pages 343 – 351).

Background before reading Genesis 45:1-15:

The Joseph cycle in Genesis is an extensive, beautifully written piece full of suspense and emotion. The Joseph cycle stretches from chapters 37-50 of Genesis and the plot goes like this: Joseph is the first-born of Jacob’s beloved wife Rachel. As such, Joseph is much beloved by his father, is pampered and protected by Jacob, and is given a very vibrant, expensive cloak or coat of some renown, signifying Jacob’s favoritism of Joseph. Joseph’s coat only serves to magnify the jealousy and hatred his brothers have for Joseph.

To add insult to injury for his brothers, Joseph is a dreamer. And his dreams are dreams of dominance and power over his ten older brothers. The older brothers hate Joseph – we might say for very good reasons. They plot to kill Joseph, but end up selling Joseph to Ishmaelite traders passing through Canaan on their way to sell goods in Egypt. The brothers take Joseph’s cloak of many colors and stain it with goat’s blood in an attempt to convince their father Jacob that Joseph is dead.

Once in Egypt, the Joseph plot thickens. He is sold as a slave to the house of Potiphar, the captain of the Pharaoh’s guard. Potiphar’s wife makes sexual advances towards Joseph. Joseph refuses her and she accuses Joseph of raping her. Potiphar has Joseph thrown into prison where over several years, Joseph distinguishes himself as a reader of dreams. When Pharaoh has some nightmares that his diviners cannot interpret, Joseph is called out of prison to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams concerning an impending severe famine.

Because of his success interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph is put in charge of all of Egypt, including Egypt’s preparation for the severe famine. Joseph distinguishes himself with his leadership across all Egypt. The famine hits. It is powerful and extensive, causing people from all over the Middle East to come to Egypt for food.

Jacob sends his sons from Canaan down to Egypt to buy food. Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize Joseph. Continuing to disguise himself, Joseph arranges an elaborate test to see if his brothers have changed in character. Ultimately Joseph will detain Benjamin, his younger brother born to Joseph's mother Rachel, whom Joseph has never seen. Judah offers his own life in exchange for Benjamin's which apparently satisfies Joseph's need to see some character change in his brothers. Joseph is now ready to divulge his identity to his brothers. Listen to God's word from Genesis 45:1-15...

"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. ² And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. ³ Joseph 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. ⁴ Then 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. 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. ⁹ Hurry 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. ¹⁰ You 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. ¹¹ I 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.' ¹² And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. ¹³ You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." ¹⁴ Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. ¹⁵ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."

There are three clauses in our text today around which the Joseph drama reaches its climax. These clauses have significant importance for the Joseph cycle in Genesis and, these three clauses impact the biblical witness to God moving forward throughout the rest of the biblical narrative. Thus, it is important that we pause a while, sit with these clauses, and ponder their impact.

The three clauses are: *"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt...And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here...for God sent me before you to preserve life."* (Genesis 45:4c – 5)

"I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." We have been waiting for three long chapters across the book of Genesis for Joseph to reveal himself to his brothers. The time has finally arrived and the language of disclosure is stunning. "I am..." is none other than the language used in Scripture for the self-disclosure of God. Moses will later hear the self-disclosure of God's name in Exodus at the burning bush, "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14) The Babylonian exiles will hear in Isaiah, "Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: I am the first and the last; besides me there is no god" (Isaiah 44:6). In John's gospel Jesus will use the "I am" statements as a window into his divine nature and purpose: "I am the bread of life...I am the vine...I am the way, the truth, and the life" (See John 6:35; John 15, and John 14:6)

When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers using the "I am" statement, something deeply profound, even divine is going on in this drama. With the Egyptians ordered out of the room by Joseph, leaving him alone with his brothers, the statement, "I am your brother..." is deeply disturbing to the brothers, and yet at the same time, deeply redemptive. Joseph could have said, "I am going to lock you up forever...I am going to torture you for all the years of neglect I suffered because you sold me into slavery...I am going to have you hanged for your dastardly deed."

But no, "I am your brother, Joseph..." With this "I am" statement Joseph is conveying common blood, and yet, divinely opening a redemptive way forward. "I am your brother, Joseph..." Joseph is pronouncing mercy, where revenge is expected; Joseph is offering forgiveness where retaliation is the norm. And that is the point. The norm in human relationships is revenge and retaliation; a strike back by those struck. And this cycle of violence most often characterizes our human experience and history as the cycle goes round and round and round with violence and payback, violence and payback, violence and payback.

But here, in the midst of the "I am..." of reconciliation, the normal cycle of human violence and payback is broken. By pronouncing "I am your brother, Joseph..." instead of "I am going to hang the lot of you," avenues of renewed relationship are open; walls of retaliation are torn down; blockades of revenge are obliterated and the result is possibility for a new future, possibility for a new way forward, possibility of a new avenue to travel together as brothers united in the common good.

Joseph's second statement reads, "And now, do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here..." Imagine yourself one of the brothers of Joseph. Your little brother Joseph is your stepbrother, the son of your father's favorite wife Rachel. And you? Well, you are a mixture of brothers from the same father Jacob but with mothers ranging from the not-loved wife Leah, to housemaids Zilpah and Bilhah. You are a son of Jacob, no doubt, but not a beloved son, not a cherished son, not the son upon whom the dotage and affection of the father rests.

Thus, out of jealousy, one day you take matters into your own hands and fake the death of Joseph, sell him into slavery, and break your father Jacob's heart at the news you give him of his beloved Joseph's death. You are brothers of deceit, brothers of lies, brothers of arrogance and revenge. Only now, the one you were certain was dead, is alive; the one you were certain was gone, is very much present; the one you were more than happy to rid your lives of, is now the only one who can save your lives. Expecting nothing short of a sentence of death for your actions, you hear instead, "do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here..."

Put yourself in the brothers' place: Could you stand the sound of such grace? Could you believe such mercy? Could you accept such forgiveness? Where else have we heard such grace, seen such mercy, beheld such forgiveness? In Luke's Parable of the Prodigal Son, such mercy and forgiveness is truly the offended father running to welcome the prodigal son home; in our text from Matthew's gospel today, it is surely Jesus himself being given a needed reminder from the mouth of a Gentile woman that God's mercy and forgiveness reach even to the Gentile dogs; such grace, mercy, and forgiveness surely are experienced by the disciples who abandoned Jesus on the cross, only to hear on Easter evening upon seeing the resurrected Jesus for the first time: *"Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you"* (John 20:21).

Joseph insists to his brothers who had sold him years ago into slavery: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here..." No demand, no reckoning, no accounting...just sheer grace, sheer mercy, sheer forgiveness. The name Joseph means "added by God," and surely at this point the estranged, astounded brothers are indeed feeling that Joseph has added by God in their behalf.

The third statement of Joseph that has such a profound effect on the Joseph cycle in Genesis and the rest of the biblical witness is: "for God sent me before you to preserve life." Notice the emphasis, "God sent..." things are already in motion; God sent...things are already moving toward God's fulfillment; God sent...time and history, and thus Joseph and his brothers' story are moving toward a culmination in the good and just fulfillment God intends and sends into human history.

This is a profound statement of biblical faith that God's way is working its way in and through and around us; God's way is working sometimes with our decisions, sometimes against the decisions we make – but always for God's gracious and noble end. The brothers act in jealousy and revenge and Joseph is sold into slavery – but God turned their jealous deed to good purpose. Joseph is falsely thrown into prison for allegedly raping Potiphar's wife – but God used Joseph's imprisonment as a springboard for Joseph into the household of Pharaoh, a springboard for God's good purpose. A devastating famine brings suffering and hunger across the Mediterranean basin– but God uses it to re-unite the children of Jacob and to keep the promise alive of life to all through the witness of the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

The actors in this drama never knew that something more profound and deep under and around and through their decisions is working its way out. They were going about their lives, making their decisions, sometimes out of reasonableness, sometimes out of jealousy and spite, sometimes out of desperation for food. And yet all along, in and through and around their decisions – sometimes working with them, sometimes working against them – God was working God's way out.

It is true that this text confirms that God's way is hidden and mysterious. But biblical faith never flinches from the strongly held belief that God has a plan, God's plan is just and merciful, God's plan is sovereign and in the end it will predominate. None other than Jesus tells us that God's plan can be trusted for our good because God is our Abba – our benevolent, present, giving, and caring heavenly parent. (see Matthew 6:25-33)

Our text from Genesis ends on this amazing note: "...and after that his brothers talked with him." It is important to realize that in the end strong and enduring human relationships are built on the ability to talk with one another. Strong and enduring human relationships are founded on the ability to talk with each other – to hear the other and the other hear you; to share with the other and the other shares with you; to be vulnerable to the other as the other is vulnerable to you; to listen to what the other believes and to have the other listen to what you believe as together you forge a common pathway forward.

How could Joseph and his estranged brothers get to such authenticity in their relationships? By acknowledging that God has our best interest in mind and that even when we cannot see it, God is working to bring good about in our lives. I believe that such a trust in God frees us to be at peace with ourselves and with God and thus teaches us who we truly are: "I am Joseph, your brother..." and trusting God and being

at peace frees us to be constructive and generous and fair in our actions toward others –
“And now, do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here.”

Can you imagine what would be possible in our lives, in our nation, in this world if we would follow Joseph as an example of how to relate in our human interactions. Can you imagine what would be possible in these times of strained political dialogue, in these times of blind ideological zeal, in these times of societal grievances and cultural challenges where we are pitted against each other – male against female, Black against white, conservative against liberal, Democrat against Republican.

Can you imagine what kind of outcomes would be possible for us, for this nation, for this world if we would follow Joseph as our example: Trust God is working for the good in our time and across the pages of human history – past, present, and future. Be at peace because you are a child of this good and gracious God and you cannot, no matter how hard you try, have all the answers. Practice forgiveness and mercy toward your opponent or enemy, instead of dead end, dead-on-arrival retaliation and revenge – because Joseph knew that forgiveness and mercy toward those who have wronged you is the only path forward into the goodness God intends for all his children.

If we trust God has a plan, find our true peace in God, and practice forgiveness and mercy toward our estranged brothers and sisters, then maybe, just maybe, we can arrive at this point in OUR relationships: “And [Joseph] kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”