



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
CHURCH UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

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Family

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Genesis: 45-3-11, 15

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. 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. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. 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. 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; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. 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. 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. 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.’ And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Sermon:

I want you to take a moment and breathe deeply in. Go ahead, breathe in and breathe out. I want you to do it again, and this time I want you to shut your eyes and find yourself in a place of peace and keep those eyes shut. Now in the midst of that peace, in the midst of those shut eyes and open hearts, I invite you for a moment to think about your family. And with those thoughts, open your eyes and come back to this moment. I don’t know what came into that space of contemplation, if joys came into your mind, if thoughts of family gatherings and love and fellowship and celebration came to mind, then all is well. For after all, Psalm 133 proclaims, “How good it is when people dwell in unity.” Then again, if struggle or conflict or even dysfunction came to mind, know this, honesty is paramount, and the Bible tells you if that is what came to mind when you thought of your family, you are not alone. For to read the Bible and to read the stories of the families of the Bible is to encounter families in all of their fullness of joy and absolutely in their fullness of dysfunction.

From the very first family on earth, we have Adam and Eve, whose sons Cain and Abel don’t exactly set the standard for brotherly love, do they? Then there is the founder of our

faith, Abraham, the one through whose covenant all nations will be blessed, the one who is bold enough to say to God, “Here I am,” and set off on his way for a land that God would show him. What you might not know about him and his wife is that along the way multiples of times he, out of fear for himself, dismissed his wife claiming that she was his sister. He let his wife be taken into the king’s harem for the sake of his own expediency. The father of our faith, the bearer of the covenant. If you think your family has issues, maybe it’s ok. Oftentimes, commentary and research on these early families point out all the flaws. We look at and notice the ways in which things seem to our contemporary eyes a little askew. But some recent commentary has focused instead on the fact that despite all of these problems, despite all of this discord, these people clung together. How Adam and Eve, facing loss of paradise and loss of a son, clung to each other, and the human race was born. How Abraham and Sarah, facing odds that none of us can imagine, and promises that seem far-fetched, to say the least, clung to each other until a nation of people was born.

And then there is this family that our Genesis reading introduced us to this morning. The father’s name is Jacob, the one who would be named Israel. This is no ordinary family, this is Israel’s family. He had twelve sons, not just a good number, but each of those sons would represent the tribes of the nation of Israel. This family, oh if you know this family, they should be downright consolation to you.

There was Israel, oh Israel. The Bible says this, “Now Israel loved Joseph more than all of his other children.” Favoritism giving way right there in the Bible. And I’m sure the brothers learned this over and over again by the way that Israel treated his youngest son. But in case they just hadn’t gotten it, and just to drive the point home, he gives his son a gift. What is that gift? A coat of many colors. Well, that is one way to understand the translation of *kessoneth passim*, but there are others. Probably what that phrase reveals is *kessoneth*, a coat, *passim*, from palms to the soles of your feet. A long gown this would have been, a long gown that distinguished that whoever was wearing it was free from manual labor because it was not the kind of robe one might wear to work in. Oh, and it gets better, my friends. The only other time this gown shows up in the Bible, do you know who is wearing it? The virginal princesses of the royal court. Oh, Israel loved his son so much that he gave him a gift that not only made him a slacker in his family, but identified him as a royal princess.

Poor Joseph. And you’ve got to imagine what that did to Joseph. The Bible tells us that often his brothers were out in the fields tending the flocks, the job that normally would have been reserved for the youngest among them. But Joseph was never anywhere to be found. Maybe, as I have discovered with my robe, it’s hard to get up when you’re wearing such a thing. Or maybe it was because he had bought into his father’s idea that he was special and privileged. But we know this, Joseph turned into a real piece of work, and his brothers knew it. Whether their anger was directed at their father or at their brother, they came up with a plan. They were going to get rid of their brother, and not just get rid of him figuratively. The plan was they were going to kill him. And they made this plan until the elder brother Reuben intervened and said no, let’s not do that, let’s just stick him in a pit. Now the Bible gives Reuben a pass, saying he was going to come back and save Joseph. But before he could do that, his other brothers decided, huh, there’s something in it for us, and sold Joseph to a group passing by. They took Joseph’s coat, that beautiful gown, and they smeared it with goat’s blood, and brought it back to their father, and let the father decide what it all meant. If you think your family has some things to work on... Oh Israel, and his family...

What resulted was a grief-stricken father. The brothers, who knows what they carried around with them? And Joseph, he ended up in Egypt, and before he rose to power, he was imprisoned. For years they did not see each other. For years, all of these emotions welled up in each of the parties. For Israel, the grief mounted and mounted and mounted. For the brothers, the shame of what they had done weighed on their hearts. And you have to wonder for Joseph, exiled from his land, torn from his family, what feelings he must have felt toward those brothers of his. Now, maybe it was because his dad dressed him in that gown, the one fit for royalty, maybe it was because his dad had made him feel so special and privileged. But then again, I think it's because God had a hand in it all, but Joseph would rise up through the ranks in Egypt. He would eventually be put in charge of a great many things. For him, he would control the Pharaoh's purse, the Pharaoh's lands, he would control virtually everything that the Pharaoh had asked him to.

And then he meets his brothers. This is not the first time his brothers had come. They had come multiple times before because, you see, famine had fallen upon his family. And the first time the brothers came, Joseph was angry. Joseph recognized his brothers but his brothers did not recognize him. And so Joseph played a game with them. Maybe it was revenge, but he had his brothers locked up in prison. Maybe it was anger towards them for all the missed years he had spent. But he exacted revenge on his brothers, insisting first that they tell him about his father, whom he still loved, and then that they send him his brother. Over and over again we go through this dance of brothers meeting brothers and yet not being able to break through and recognize one another.

But something happens along the way. Some of the commentators I read this week said that Joseph underwent psychological growth during his time in Egypt. And I think that is a contemporary way of perhaps understanding how Joseph came to a new place. But I wonder if there wasn't a hand of God in all of it, too. Certainly, Joseph understands it that way, certainly Joseph paints a picture of him being sent to a place by God despite the difficult circumstances, to be in a position to be able to help. But something in this last visit is different from all of the previous visits. And that is the gift that we come here each week to bathe in, the gift we discover, the gift that we share in the beginning of worship each week, the gift of reconciliation. True reconciliation, true bonding back to one another. And anyone who lives in any family knows that at the heart of being family there has to be forgiveness. For if not, our families or this family would quickly splinter into a million pieces.

Notice it starts with something very simple. The one who had been wronged, well, he wasn't completely innocent, but Joseph being honest says to his brothers, "I am your brother, the one you sold into slavery." An offer of forgiveness before it was even asked. Joseph inviting the brothers in to tell them the story about how grace had unfolded in the midst of the sins they had all committed against one another. And then Joseph makes it clear that he thinks God was behind it all, making all things possible.

It is dangerous sometimes in this world to imagine God's hand in everything, because then we have to face those difficult questions about natural disasters, and why some people hurt and some do not. But what Joseph saw is God's hand in the possibility of a new beginning. What I think Joseph saw here was that God was at work, even in a place that seemed an impossible dead end, to be a new opening. And remember it would be in Egypt that Israel and his sons

would grow into a great nation. It would be there in this place that this new possibility, born out of horrible circumstances, that it would all be made right.

But then it is at the end of this passage that Joseph did what Adam and Eve did. Joseph did what Abraham and Sarah did. Joseph clung to his brothers. There is an ancient 5th century teacher, Caesarius, who was bishop of a place called Arles. And he sees in this act, in this final verse, this verse of Joseph grabbing his brothers, and weeping over them, telling them not to be afraid, this act that restores relationship, he sees this as the most tender act. He sees Joseph weeping upon each of them, kissing each of his brothers one at a time, honoring each of them in the fullness of relationship. Here is what he writes: “As Joseph moistened the necks of his frightened brothers with his refreshing tears, he wiped away their hatred.”

I don't know about your family, but I know about this family here. We choose one another, we cling to one another, and I know this, that we let each other down. As a church, we sometimes, like Israel, play favorites. We sometimes, like Joseph, fail to live up or into our calling of serving each other. We may even on occasion get back at one another, hopefully falling short of selling each other to a traveling band. But what is important about this story is what is important for this church, which is that no matter how wrong we may have been, we cling to each other trusting that new beginnings are possible. This church's history has been through a number of hard times and heartaches and difficult moments. And yet what amazes me about this place is that you have consistently clung to each other, no matter where the fault lies, no matter where the problems originate, and that is the first step of family.

The other is this moment that Joseph gives to his brothers, this acceptance of reconciliation, this offer of forgiveness, this weeping over one another, until all of our hatred, all of our misgivings, all of our wonderings dissipate back into relationship. This is not some ancient story from some far off land. I think it's the story that unfolds every time that someone is wronged, that someone makes a bad choice. Reconciliation breaks out and suddenly the position of the victim, the one who is wronged like Joseph here in this story, turns from being wronged to co-creating with God a new beginning, a new path that lies before us, a new thing waiting to happen.

The people of Israel found home and blessing in the land of Egypt. That too would not last. And the tension between Israel and Egypt would be something that would live on to this day. But in this story we get a piece of the truth that Menachem Begin, someone from Israel who reached out to reconcile with Egypt, had to say: “Peace is the beauty of life. It is sunshine. It is the smile of a child, the love of a mother, the joy of a father, the togetherness of a family. It is the advancement of all humanity, the victory of a just cause, the triumph of truth.” Friends, this story this morning reminds us that we are called to be family. Not perfect, not always in our Sunday best. But like Adam and Eve before us, like Abraham and Sarah before us, like Joseph, his father and his brothers before us, to cling to one another. And just as importantly, to offer and to seek forgiveness, which allows all new beginnings to unfold. That is what we are called to be: yes, the Body of Christ, and also the Family of Faith.

Amen.

The Rev. Brent Damrow, Pastor