

Genesis 45:1-15
August 14, 2011

“Joseph and his Brothers”

Rev. William G. Utke
Emanuel UCC, HC

In the mid 1990's I served as one of the Pastors at Bethlehem UCC in Ann Arbor, Michigan. For a city with a population just over 100,000 there was a lot happening in “A squared.” One of my favorite annual summer events was the art fair featuring innovative and creative artists displaying their work. The art displays were set up on the sidewalks up and down Main Street which was just 3 blocks from the office, on lunch breaks I would walk over and stroll through the fair.

I remember table after table of artists able to envision beauty drawn out of the strangest materials. My favorite exhibit each year was by an artist who made stunningly beautiful and inspiring art out of items he picked out of trash. This artist would collect materials others had thrown away and turn them into art.

Considering the ugly, hateful violence we have witnessed lately we need someone like that artist; someone who can turn trash into treasure, ugliness into beauty, and hate into love. I hope as people of faith we can agree that violence, born of hatred for a group of people, simply because God made them to be different than we are, is sin. But how can we respond? One response says, here are the top 10 ways you can get involved to counter this violence. And we should try to find ways to get involved. But I think something is missing from the discussion, a spiritual foundation that may be even more difficult. As we turn to the story of Joseph I think he exemplifies this foundation which grows from his ability, like that artist at the Art fair, to see value in that which others would discard.

Joseph was one of the 12 sons of Jacob. It was clear that he was Jacob's favorite son. Joseph was given the coat of many colors while his brothers looked on wearing old jeans and ripped t-shirts. Joseph would have wild dreams about how he was going to be Mr. Big and his brothers would all be groveling at his feet; And, he had the nerve to recount these dreams to his brothers at breakfast each morning. As you can imagine, none of this endeared Joseph to his brothers very much.

In fact, his brothers planned to kill him. On their way they got sidetracked and ended up selling Joseph to some Egyptians assuming they would make some money and he would be as good as dead. Then they took his clothes and rigged them to look like their brother had lost a battle with some wild cats, and they showed their father. Everyone was convinced Joseph was dead.

But Joseph wasn't dead, in Egypt, he began life as a slave. But because of his ability to farm and understand dreams; he worked his way up to Secretary of Agriculture and Chief Dream interpreter to the Pharaoh.

About that time a famine hit in Joseph's homeland of Canaan. People came to Joseph from far and wide because Egypt had big storehouses of food to share. International relief efforts were in full force. Among those who came to Egypt were Joseph's brother's but when they encountered Joseph they didn't recognize him because he was speaking Egyptian and wearing Royal clothes.

After a few meetings hiding his identity from his brothers and having a little fun with them, Joseph's Spiritual maturity took over. His need to become reunited with his family became stronger than his desire for revenge on his brothers; one day Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. They were scared at first, frightened he was going to retaliate, but Joseph assured them it was ok; saying, "Come closer to me, . . . I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me; for God sent me before you to preserve life. . . "

That statement from Joseph is a Pacific Ocean size dose of spiritual maturity. Essentially Joseph is saying, "hey Brothers, no worry about trying to kill me, or selling me off to the Egyptians, I am not angry, I forgive you and I want to help you all be sure our family and our nation survives the famine and I want to be reunited with you and Dad.

Joseph had the power to exact great revenge on his brothers. He had the power to have them enslaved or to ignore their request for food and let them die. Instead, filled with spiritual maturity, Joseph discovered a pattern of God's grace in his life. He saw how God's goodness was greater than his brother's sins.

This Mighty God can use injustice, hatred, and violence to create unity. It isn't the way of God, but God can use humanity's inhumanity to one another, accompanied by our courageous faith, to carve hatred into love, violence into peace, despair into hope, death... into life.

To me the spiritual Foundation that is missing is forgiveness. Joseph choose forgiveness when people, even people of faith, would have chosen revenge. Forgiveness is often viewed as a weak response to injustice. But I think this is only true for people who don't really understand the very difficult work of forgiveness.

Robert Enright, a Professor at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, developed a K-12 curriculum centered on forgiveness. The original curriculum focused on issues like bullying, gender-based violence, poverty and trauma, particularly among children. Since then the curriculum has been adapted by people like Chaplain Maria Gambaro who works in Maximum Security Prisons. Research is beginning to suggest students in school demonstrate decreased levels of anger after the curriculum, and inmates in jail have a lower re-incarceration rate after the Chaplain's program. Professor Enright is trying to help people understand forgiveness as a virtue, similar to compassion and patience.

The other reason people think forgiveness equates with weakness is we often misunderstand what forgiveness is and what it isn't. Professor Enright writes about the steps to forgiveness for the one who is wronged,

- "Know that you have been treated unfairly by another (or by yourself if this is self-forgiveness)
- Recognize your pain and realize that you have to do something about this.
- Know what forgiveness is and is not (IT IS... being good to those who are not good to you. IT IS not excusing, forgetting, necessarily reconciling, or abandoning justice.)
- Commit to doing no harm to the one who hurt you.
- Expand your vision of the other. See the person's worth as a person.
- Be aware of compassion as it slowly emerges in you.
- Bear the pain of what happened so you do not transfer this to innocent others or to the one who hurt you.
- Consider a gift to the other such as a kind word.
- Try to find new meaning in what you have suffered.

Those steps take great personal and spiritual strength; and as we heard from the Professor, the hard work of justice and reconciliation, where possible, still lies ahead. Still, much like an artist who turns trash into inspiring treasure, Joseph decided though his life had not taken the preferred path; nonetheless, God's was still at work every step of the way; carving a path of hope and promise out of the worst circumstances.

The beauty of God's artistry shines when Joseph at the end of the story, with the shoe on the other foot, offers exuberant forgiveness to his brothers. Joseph, now holding all the power and resources that his brothers need; holding their lives in his hands, as they did his... he freely chooses forgiveness.

That's God at work, that's faith at work.

Richard Rohr, a renown Christian voice once said, "If we do not transform our pain, we will transmit it... If there isn't some way to find some deeper meaning to our suffering, to find that God is somehow in it, and can even use it for good, we will normally close up and close down."

And Teresa of Calcutta reminds us, "If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other."

Amen

