

Sermon for August 27, 2017
Joseph: Beyond the Technicolor Dreamcoat
“Throne of Games.”

Genesis 45:1-15

Once upon a time there was a boy named Joseph. We have come a long way with Joseph since the beginning of the month. By the end of last week's lesson things were going pretty good for Joseph. He was in charge of all of Egypt, 2nd only to Pharaoh. By today's lesson he's been administering the state for Pharaoh for almost a decade. He had a wife and children and a meaningful calling that had made him rich and famous.

After Joseph had interpreted the dreams that Pharaoh had, he was put in charge of buying the excess grain during the years of plenty. Then, when the drought hit, he was able to sell the grain back to the people. He was able to play a pivotal role in preventing mass starvation. Behind him were the things of his past. He thought not of a colorful coat that must have been like rags compared to the robes he now wore. In the past was the jealousy and murderous hatred of his brothers. Behind him was the pit, and the slavers, and the prison.

Joseph thought all that was in his past. Just a memory, fading from awareness; that was another life lived by a different man. Then one day out of the blue, totally unexpected, it happened. As Joseph was sitting on his throne overseeing the distribution of grain, there in the crowd were his brothers! They came forward and bowed down to him, and he remembered the dream! The sheaves of wheat they had all bound bowing down to his sheath. Seeking grain they bowed down fulfilling the dream! All the pain and fear and anger and love and hate came bubbling up within him. What would Joseph do?

Joseph could have responded in any number of ways. The way he does respond takes up 3 chapters in Genesis. Let me summarize: After speaking harshly to his brothers, he accuses them of being spies. They didn't recognize him or know that he could understand them. He overheard them saying that this treatment must be punishment for what they did to their brother, meaning him. First he imprisoned them for three days, then he offers to sell them the grain they need, but one of them has to stay behind until they can bring their youngest brother they mentioned to prove the truth of their story. So Joseph picked Simeon, the oldest of the brothers who sold him into slavery, to stay in prison until they came back with their youngest brother.

But that wasn't the end. That night when they stopped to feed their pack animals, they each opened their sacks of grain and found the bags of money, they had used to pay for them, in the top of each sack. Someone had made a tragic mistake and it made them look like thieves. So they went on home to tell their father what had happened. Israel was distraught. He had lost Joseph and now Simeon. He could not bear to risk losing another son. So he refused to let them take Benjamin to Egypt.

But the famine persisted and they ran out of grain and had no choice but to go back again. They knew they would have to take Benjamin with them this time. So Israel told them to take double the payment and gifts. When Joseph saw that they had brought Benjamin, he received them like honored guests and had a banquet. When the brothers were served Benjamin receive five times what everyone else received.

Then he ordered them to be given their grain so they could return home. But Joseph was not finished with them. He ordered that their payment be put in their sacks with the grain again. He also ordered that his personal silver goblet be placed in Benjamin's sack. The next day they left, and after a few hours Joseph sent servants to track them down and find the planted evidence.

Benjamin was framed! They all were brought back to Joseph and he declared that the one who stole the goblet would remain as a slave and all the others could go free. Then Judah stepped in and offered to take Benjamin's place and remain a slave. It was at this point that Joseph broke down and revealed himself in the passage we read this morning.

What's going on here? It seems that Joseph is just playing games with them. Is he using his throne, his position of power, to play with them like a cat plays with mice? Is he trying to punish them for all they did to him? Is he just being mean and vindictive?

I don't think so. First of all I believe that, in his heart, Joseph had forgiven them. He had grown to understand that God was with him through all that had happened. He could see God's hand at work in his life. I also point to the fact that he was moved to tears repeatedly not to anger or rage.

So why didn't he just reveal himself to his brothers; why all the games? I think that he didn't know if he could trust them. They almost killed him and then sold him into slavery. What might they do? He had a family to think of. If they had sold him into slavery, then they might do the same or worst to his wife and children.

So he tests them. Would they come back for their brother Simeon? Would they be jealous when Benjamin received special treatment? Would they leave Benjamin in slavery, if it meant they would go free? In the end when Judah offered to take Benjamin's place: to sell himself into slavery, to redeem his brother out of slavery, that act proved that they could be trusted. They had learned to love even pesky little brothers who get special treatment.

The key to all of this is understanding the difference between forgiveness and reconciliation. Forgiveness can be difficult. When someone wrongs us, it can be hard to move past that pain and truly forgive their actions. But forgiveness only takes one person. You can forgive another without them ever acknowledging or participating. And when you do you are freed from the anger and resentment that holding a grudge causes.

Reconciliation on the other hand takes more. Both parties have to participate. There has to be confession and forgiveness and repentance. The victim needs to forgive and the one who wronged them needs to admit the wrong and seek to change. It may take some time for trust to be brought back. It can be a long growth process, but the relationship can be healed.

We see these elements in the actions of the brothers and Joseph. They admitted that they had done wrong in their judgment that they were being treated like that because of their actions against Joseph. They also showed that they had changed when Judah offered to take Benjamin's place. They were no longer brothers who sold one of their own into slavery, but had become brothers who volunteered to go into slavery to redeem them.

In 2 Corinthians Paul talks about reconciliation. He says that in Christ God was reconciling the world to God's self.(5:19) Jesus, out of love and forgiveness, came into our midst to reach out to us. So like Joseph God has forgiven us, but we have to respond. To restore the relationship that we damaged through our mistreatment of God and God's people, we have to acknowledge our wrong doing. Then we have to choose to change, we have to seek, with God's help, to be reconciled.

In that same passage in 2 Corinthians, Paul also says that we have been given this ministry of reconciliation. As with Joseph and his brothers that reconciliation can be a long hard journey. Calling and helping others to be reconciled to God can be difficult. For Jesus this ministry led to his death. For many Christians it has led to persecution and even martyrdom.

But this ministry is not just about reconciling people to God. It also involves helping people be reconciled to each other. This can also be spoken of as peacemaking. Often people and groups of people do not want to admit that they have wronged others or stood by while others were harmed.

Our own nation's struggles with racial reconciliation are examples of that. We desire to be a nation where all people are treated equally, but often we fail to come to terms with our history of racism. The current climate concerning the treatment of African Americans and Native Americans are symptoms of this problem. To truly grow beyond that racist heritage, and not simply whitewash it, we need to confess and truly seek to change; to repent. Being practitioners and ministers of that message of reconciliation can be difficult, but if the church cannot do it, then who can?

Joseph's story teaches us the struggle of reconciliation. But it also shows us the joy. Joseph and his brothers once divided by pride and jealousy and animosity embrace one another in the end. They had committed acts of hatred and violence towards one another, now they express love.

Be reconciled to God. God is like a parent standing with arms open to us. All we need to do is turn to God and accept the embrace.

Be reconciled with others. If there is someone with whom you have had a falling out, forgive them and admit the wrong you did to them. And know that God is already at work in your lives to equip you to be reconciled.

Then take up this ministry of reconciliation. In love, seek justice and peace. It may mean forgiving people of horrendous atrocities and admitting our own acts of hatred. It may mean saying some unpopular things about the state of affairs in our community and world. It may mean suffering alongside those who are alienated and who need to be reconciled.

In the end, it will be worth it. In Christ, God is at work reconciling the world to God's self, and we have been given this ministry of participating in God's ministry of reconciliation. Take up that ministry, then like Joseph, you can embrace your brothers, and sisters, in the love of God!