

## RECONCILIATION – OR REVENGE?

**TEXT:** Genesis 45:1-15

Jesus' famous admonition, "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you", is far more quoted than practiced. It is regularly been said that no one can, in reality, do such a thing, since it moves well beyond our too-limited human capacities. Such a thing is okay for Jesus – after all he is the Son of God! – but since I am not, I will more likely hate, or at least feel little regard for my enemies and will probably pray for their eventual demise. Why would Jesus call us to do something we are little inclined to do?

It might just be that this "love your enemy" bit is rather more practical and useful than first meets the eye. The story of Joseph and his brothers may be a case in point. A lot has happened since last week's tale of Joseph's brothers selling him off to a bunch of Midianite traders who were heading for Egypt. We left the brothers thinking that they had rid themselves of this tattling, bragging little brother who was so favored by their father Jacob. Joseph's behavior toward his siblings presents no virtues that should win our admiration or our sympathy.

So what has happened to our anti-hero between chapters 37 and 45 of the Book of Genesis? Well, he is taken off to Egypt and is there purchased by Potiphar, "a captain of the guard", who has installed him as an overseer in his house. We are told emphatically that God is active in Joseph's life, making him successful in all his undertakings. Potiphar, noticing Joseph's success, wants it to rub off on him and his household, so he raises Joseph into a position of power within his household. The snag in all this is that the person who most notices Joseph is Potiphar's wife and she uses her position to try to compel him to do her will, which translates to a sexual relationship, which Joseph rejects. In the corridors of the mighty, lust and corruption are rampant, destroying lives and deforming governmental structures, and we begin to feel like we are in another soap opera, but this time it's "House of Cards".

When Joseph rejects Potiphar's wife, she is, of course, a bit put out so she arranges to have him put in prison. Shows like "House of Cards" tend to reflect our current reality. In American politics those at the apex of power today may well stumble tomorrow, land in the pit of disgrace, only to rebound back into power after a decent interval. In this sense, Joseph's story is a familiar one; it is replete with imagery of ascent, descent and return to the heights of power. Even the scourge of human trafficking, exemplified in Potiphar's purchase of Joseph, is still a feature of 21<sup>st</sup> century life.

A key difference between Joseph's story and politics today is Joseph's integrity. Most of the politicians who fall from power today do so because of their own failings, their own capitulation to corruption, greed, and lust. Joseph, on the other hand, falls from power because he dares to say "no" to corrupting power. He could have had a sweet deal, sleeping with Potiphar's wife, running his house – Potiphar didn't need to know. But he decided to take the difficult path, and it led him to prison.

So, how did Joseph manage his release from prison? He went back to his days of dream interpretation. And he used the resources of his brains and his faith in God to leverage himself out of what seemed a hopeless situation.

He was intimately sensitive to the minds of other people, and this is what made him good at interpreting dreams. He would use what he knew of their hopes and fears to explain the dream to them. He was so successful at doing this while in prison that people began to talk about him and seek out his advice. Eventually his skill was mentioned in high places, and he was brought before Pharaoh in the hope that he might be able to interpret a rather obscure and worrying dream that was plaguing Pharaoh's mind. Joseph brought a fresh perspective. He was able to interpret the dream so successfully that Pharaoh entrusted him with much more than merely interpreting an occasional dream.

His former troubles forgotten, Joseph was taken into Pharaoh's service, where he became increasingly trusted with running the country. Right from the start Joseph did all

he could to integrate himself into Egyptian culture. When he was released from prison he was shaved and given a change of clothes before he appeared before Pharaoh, so that he looked much the same as the Egyptians. Hebrews were not clean-shaven; Egyptians shaved their head and face. Hebrews wore home-spun woolen cloth; Egyptians wore linen or cotton wrap-around skirts. This seemingly unimportant detail contained a message to Diaspora Jews (yes, that's what Joseph was) – integrate as far as you can into your host community if you want to succeed.

It was important that Joseph be seen as “one of us” to the Egyptians. Giving him an Egyptian wife was another way of de-Semitizing him, and Pharaoh arranged for this to happen. The young woman was Asenath, a high-born, aristocratic Egyptian woman, the daughter of a priest of On, another name for Heliopolis, the religious center of Ra, the god representing the sun. Joseph was given a new name, Zephenath-paneah. This, and his marriage to a priest's daughter, made him outwardly Egyptian, but it was not a religious capitulation. Joseph made this clear by unambiguously naming God as the source of his dream interpretations.

All these changes brought about by Pharaoh were a message to others that Joseph, though a Hebrew, was fully accepted at the Egyptian court and integrated into the Egyptian way of life.

Joseph and Asenath had two sons, both born during the time when the Egyptian economy was booming; it was a land of plenty. But soon things changed. The Nile floods were meager. Less land was covered with the life-giving silt and crops were poor. But Joseph had been right in his prediction of famine, and was wise to store up the country's resources against future trouble. The result was that the people did not starve and Joseph was recognized throughout the country and, at the age of 30, was appointed second-in-command to Pharaoh.

So the time has come for Joseph to be reunited with his brothers. The famine was not only in Egypt, but it covered the entire Near East. Joseph's father Jacob, and his

lying, would-be murderous brothers have traveled to Egypt where they have heard that food was plentiful due to “someone’s” plan to store up seven years worth of grain.

So, they trek off to Egypt, all the brothers except the youngest, Benjamin. It has been 20 years since they sold Joseph off into slavery. Interestingly, Joseph conceals his identity and tests his family, locking up his brother Simeon until the rest of the brothers’ return to Canaan and come back with Benjamin. So he plays a nasty little game with them. Yes, it is time for Joseph to get his revenge. Using his many skills he receives their money for grain and arranges for a servant to slip the money back into their sacks so that they accused of theft. He also hides his magic divining cup in Benjamin’s pack, so they are again accused of theft.

So we are now ready to delve into the culmination of Joseph’s revenge – or reconciliation – you choose which. What has come of his dreams, of course, is that they will now come true. Joseph’s power in Egypt will save the lives of his family, who will bow down to him, as he had told them many years before. This disturbing episode of violence and betrayal becomes the means by which Israel’s descendants will survive the terrible famine. A sense of the Providence of God runs powerfully through the Joseph cycle, no more clearly than in Joseph’s words in this closing chapter: “Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.”

At last, finally, Joseph reveals who has been all along. “I am Joseph; is my father still alive?” Tears of joy, and perhaps of forgiveness, flowed from Joseph and his long-lost family as they were reunited after so many years.

The stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph occupy nearly fifty chapters of the book of Genesis. It is full of tragedy, deceit, promises, suffering. This is the story of the people that God chose to bring into being the Messianic Kingdom which would eventually bring Jesus the Christ into the world. What does this tell us about God? What does it tell us about our lives today?

God not only chose Abraham and his family, God provided and cared for them, even when they used deceit and treachery against their own family. God led Abraham and Sara into a foreign land and provided a son for them in their old age. God was not above the ordinary life events of the people as God led Isaac to find Rebekah for his wife. Even in God's dysfunctional family, God was with Jacob throughout his tumultuous life. God used the sisters Leah and Rachel, along with their servants, for the purpose of beginning the Messianic Nation. God supported the twelve sons of Jacob despite all their shortcomings and wickedness. And the message for us is that God supports each one of us, despite our waywardness, despite our selfishness, despite our tendencies to turn away from God. Like Abraham's family, we are all children of God and God's love, like a father's love, surrounds us all of our lives. Praise be to God! Amen.