

“Reconciled”

September 3, 2017

In the Beginning: (God’s) Family Drama series

Family reunions. We gather from all over, bring a dish to pass – maybe a specific request, and get re-acquainted with our relatives. We discover family history from our older relatives and hear their stories. We watch generations connect. My family played kickball and looked at old slides.

We’re onlookers to a touching family reunion between Joseph and his brothers. And there’s something to be said for going back to the beginning – to our origins – to learn about who we are and how we function together.

Remember that Joseph chose to share his dreams with his father and his brothers. And jealousy got the best of the brothers. Jealousy was powerful enough that they sold Joseph into slavery at Judah’s insistence.

Here’s what’s happened over 25 years. Joseph was sold to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials. Joseph was successful in his work, though he had to deal with Potiphar’s wife’s sexual advances. He refused her over and over, and she deceived Potiphar into thinking that Joseph had accosted her.

So, Joseph was sent to jail, but his ability to interpret dreams got Pharaoh’s attention. Joseph told Pharaoh that famine was coming, so Pharaoh put him in charge of preparing for it by stocking the storehouses. He did that, and when famine hit, Egypt had enough food. But the famine was so widespread even outsiders came for help – even Joseph’s family.

The brothers came to buy food, but they didn’t recognize Joseph. He knew them, and put them through some difficulties – accusing them of being spies, holding one brother hostage in exchange for food, and planting silver in their bags to accuse them of stealing.

Today’s reading is the climax of the long saga – and of our journey through Genesis. Finally, there’s a beginning to putting an end to the conflict. It’s far from perfect, but it’s a start. The family pattern is transformed. The brothers admit their guilt for what they did to Joseph, and brother Judah is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of Benjamin.

It’s a moment of repentance - and maybe what Joseph has been looking for all along. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says, “Perfect repentance comes about when you find yourself in the same situation but this time you act differently. That is proof in action of a change in heart.”

Joseph had every justification to take revenge. Who could blame him, right? He puts his brothers through some difficulty, but he’s sorrowful through it all. Finally, there’s a sense that the brothers, especially Judah, is a changed person. He’s willing to take Benjamin’s place.

And Joseph is thinking about his family and connections. He says, “I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?” **(SLIDE)** The family is coming together. Remember that Joseph and his brothers couldn’t even talk to each other peaceably when this mess started. Now they embrace and weep. It’s a picture of reconciliation - not always easy for us or anyone else. **(SLIDE)** So here’s a definition of reconciliation:

The restoration of friendly relations

The action of making one view or belief compatible with another

To reestablish a close relationship

I’ve also heard reconciliation described as a “second friendship.”

It’s all about people coming together when they’ve been apart.

We’ve been through some difficult topics in our faith family tree. Abraham and Sarah challenged us to take risks in faith and trust God. We’ve seen jealousy destroy relationships. Jacob’s wrestling with the stranger reminded us struggle is part of faith.

Through it all, God calls us into a relationship – into a covenant. God’s people, those in our faith family tree and us today, are molded into a message. God can be trusted. God gives meaning to our lives. God calls us beyond ourselves to deeper commitments.

But the call to reconciliation is the most challenging of all. It would’ve been easy for Joseph to completely reject his brothers – to send them away with no food. Revenge would’ve been sweet. Yet, Joseph calls himself their brother, even after all that he’s been through. He doesn’t justify his suffering, and neither can we. Abuse of any kind is wrong, especially painful when it comes from people we trust, especially our family.

Rev. Grace Imathiu says in reference to Joseph, “Your story isn’t about you, but it’s a testimony of God.” Yes, there’s transformation in Joseph’s family, but Joseph is transformed, too. His life has been a roller coaster ride – beloved son, hated brother, good slave, the prisoner, helper to Pharaoh. He’s able to see God’s presence in his suffering. God has brought life out of death. Famine has come, but his family will survive because they will have food. It’s not that God caused the evil, but God has the power to overcome evil with good. God can help us find new life and hope.

Yet, we don’t simply “get over” something like Joseph experienced. Rather, as Madeleine L’Engle writes, “we learn to live with them, to go on growing and deepening, and understanding, as Joseph understood, that God can come into all our pain and make something creative out of it.” L’Engle claims that Joseph learned to be a human being. He learned to be fallible and allow others to be fallible, too. Again, we can’t excuse or ignore abuse, but we see ourselves and others differently.

I know it’s not December yet, but I keep thinking of a line from “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” - “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” God coming in Jesus is the full picture of reconciliation - God who chooses to come to us and

be with us - to bring together that which was separated. The Incarnation - God coming in the flesh – is reconciliation.

As those who seek to follow Jesus Christ, we're also called to be reconcilers. But that calling falls on our ears and hearts in many different ways. You might be hearing God's word in a way that convicts you of a relationship that needs to be reconciled. God calls you, then, to be a reconciler. You need to make a move.

Jesus was clear of our calling to be reconcilers. As he tells us to love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us, he goes even further. In Matthew 5: 46, Jesus says: "For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? If you greet only your brothers and sisters, what more are you doing than others?"

Paul writes something very poignant to the Corinthians (II Corinthians 5: 18-20). "God reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."

If I believe that God sent Jesus as a means of reconciliation between God and me, then I am called to be a reconciler. We can't do that work on our own. We need God's help, and it comes to us in Christ. And our role as reconcilers is to share that message of what God does in Jesus Christ with others that they might experience reconciliation in a powerful way.

So what does a true family reunion look like? From what we see here, it's more than good food, kickball, and slideshows – much more than we might envision. Here we see honesty and repentance for wrongs done. We see forgiveness. We see reconciliation. Most of all, we see a deep sense of God's presence and power at work.

Henri Nouwen says this about the Christian community: "A Christian community is a healing community, not because wounds are cured and pains are alleviated, but because wounds and pains become openings or occasions for a new vision."

When we celebrate Holy Communion together, it's a holy time. It's more than just receiving a simple meal. We come to the table just as we are. It's a reminder of the power of God to reconcile us to himself and make us new by the power of his grace poured out.

We come with scars – I know we do. And it's not that we're supposed to leave them outside. We're supposed to bring them here so that God's power can be alive and at work in us.

Friends, by the grace of God, we have the power of reconciliation. And we must use it to bring life where there is death and connection and community where there is estrangement. I invite you to think about those people and places in your life where God is calling us to reconciliation - not forgetting the hurt, excusing the pain, or glossing

over the difficulty, but bringing it to God and asking God to help us responding with the same grace we've been given.

After Pope John Paul II died and as he's been named a saint in the Catholic Church, for many people, the most poignant moment in his life was seeing him face-to-face with the man who tried to kill him. He didn't overlook the man's actions, but he used the power of reconciliation given to him in Christ to do something good – to bring life out of death. We can, too. Jesus says in the Gospel of John, "I've come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

Our suffering can be a place to serve others in the same situation. I'm thinking of those among us who've had cancer. No one can empathize the way another survivor can. Sharing our hurt can help others deal with their own. And I've seen those who've lost a loved one reach out to one another in times of grief. That is powerful ministry in the name of Jesus.

God is leading us. God promises to lead us personally, in our family, in our work, in our church. But we have to let God lead us and let God use us to be reconcilers. We carry power in the name of Jesus Christ who came that we could be reconciled to God. Take the power. May we use it boldly.

As we prepare to come to this table where the God offers us grace and love, please join me in praying...