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September 20, 2020

Love versus Guilt

Genesis 42:6-25

6 Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who
sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers
came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to
the ground. 7 When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized
them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly
to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said,
"From the land of Canaan, to buy food." 8 Although
Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize
him. 9 Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had
dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you
have come to see the nakedness of the land!" 10 They said
to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy
food. 11 We are all sons of one man; we are honest men;
your servants have never been spies." 12 But he said to
them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the
land!" 13 They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers,
the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the
youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no
more." 14 But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said
to you; you are spies! 15 Here is how you shall be tested: as
Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your
youngest brother comes here! 16 Let one of you go and
bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison,
in order that your words may be tested, whether there is

truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies."
17 And he put them all together in prison for three days.
18 On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and
you will live, for I fear God: 19 if you are honest men, let
one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned.
The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of
your households, 20 and bring your youngest brother to me.
Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die."
And they agreed to do so. 21 They said to one another,
"Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our
brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but
we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come
upon us." 22 Then Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell
you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So
now there comes a reckoning for his blood." 23 They did
not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke
with them through an interpreter. 24 He turned away from
them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And
he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their
eyes. 25 Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain,
to return every man's money to his sack, and to give them
provisions for their journey. This was done for them.

Theme Statement

More than twenty years after Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery in Egypt, we meet them again. Their families have been hit hard by famine. They have traveled to Egypt for relief, but Joseph confronts them with harshness. Will punishment or love prevail?

Exploring the Word

Ten of Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt at their father's order. Benjamin, the favored brother after Joseph's "death," is held back for fear that he'll be in danger on such a journey. With each mile of their

250-mile journey from their Canaanite home in the valley of Hebron to the centers of power in Egypt to find food, the distance between Joseph and the brothers who threw him into a pit narrows. We may have heard this story before, as young children. If so, the interpretation we heard could well have been that this is about a family working things out after an unpleasant episode. Let's look at this story again.

Genesis 42:6-9a Bowing before their brother

Joseph remembered both his youthful dreams in which his family bowed to him (37:5-11) and the hatred for him that grew in his brothers. Now those brothers were before him, bowing so deeply in submission that their faces smudged the ground. Joseph's appearance as the second in command of Egypt had made him unrecognizable to his blood relatives. But he knew exactly who they were. Instead of welcoming them, Joseph spoke sternly from his seat of power to intimidate them. The emotional distance between them remained.

Genesis 42:9b-17 Intimidation and weakness

Unwelcome strangers—that's how Joseph treated his brothers. They were called more than "strangers"; they were labeled "spies." Joseph's words were harsh, his manner cold. The ten men bowing before him were intimidated. Why? The wealthy and powerful setting of this scene would frighten anyone. But there were ten of them, a sizable contingent, and their need for help was great. Why weren't their voices strong and convincing?

Guilt and unresolved hatred could have been weighing the brothers down, even twenty years later. In addition, anxiety had entered the situation, thanks to Joseph's threat to their brother Benjamin. Joseph dictated that one brother would return to Canaan and come back to Egypt with this youngest brother in tow. The others would wait in an

Egyptian prison. The brothers wondered, Would danger lie ahead for Benjamin? Would they lose him to this harsh Egyptian, just as they had "lost" Joseph?

Genesis 42:18-20 The plot twists

Events took a turn. Joseph met with his brothers after they'd spent three days in prison, another pit in this story. Joseph had new orders for them, prefaced by his confession that he stood in awe of God. Nine of the brothers were commanded to return home, while one would stay. Then they would return with their youngest brother, Benjamin. Bringing him to Egypt would publicly test the truth of their story, although Joseph already knew that truth well. There's more to this. We know that Joseph yearned to see again his brother of the same mother.

Genesis 42:21-25 Consequences

Something extraordinary happened when the brothers talked among themselves about Joseph's orders. The ten replayed the events of two decades earlier, when they had thrown Joseph into the pit (Genesis 37:23-24). They mourned their disregard for seventeen-year-old Joseph's anguished pleas for mercy. Now they regarded their present anguish at the hand of this cruel Egyptian as payback for their hate-filled actions.

Reuben's "I told you so" speech was followed by Joseph's tears, which he was careful to hide. Then he ordered that Simeon be tied up and left in prison. The distance between Joseph and the others grew again as the nine headed north back to Canaan. But wait—why did Joseph order that their payment for grain be smuggled back into their sacks? Was this compassion or a trick designed to frighten them? This complicated story of starvation and intimidation continues.

The Word Today

The Joseph account is not a heartwarming tale about a family reunion. A murder is planned, time in prison robs people of years of their lives, and a man greets his hungering brothers with scorn, sarcasm, suspicion, and a threat of yet another tragedy.

Were I to rewrite the Joseph story, it would be different. I believe that Jesus, Sojourner Truth, Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Nelson Mandela would sign on as coauthors. In my account, Joseph would recognize the hungry men before him as ten of his long-lost brothers. He would jump up from his throne of power, throw his arms around them, and let them know that he too was Jacob's son. All of them would weep together. The fatted calf would be roasted, and a party would ensue, just as in Jesus' story of the lost (prodigal) son and the loving father. The threats and the trips back and forth between Hebron and Egypt with various people in tow would be unnecessary. The remnants of hatred, betrayal, and suffering would not linger but would be conquered by love.

Nelson Mandela spoke frequently about the reality that we were not born to hate. Hatred has to be taught, he said time and time again. Love is easier. Why easier? We, God's children, were created in God's image. We were birthed with the gift of love flowing in our veins. Love is our birthright.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. What is the longest trip you have taken by car, plane, or hiking boots? Where did you go and how long did it take you?

Exploring the Word

1. What do you think the band of brothers from Hebron expected when they arrived in Egypt after their 250-mile trip? Choose all the answers that you think would apply, and add others:

   ___ a warm welcome, a cup of water, and a loaf of bread
   ___ a closed border, marked by armed guards
   ___ a long line of people who were starving and needed food
   ___ a BCE version of a food distribution center where they would be given a number
   ___ harsh words from those in power, accusing them of spying
   ___ other: _____

2. Every story is perceived by its listeners in differing ways. How do you understand what is happening in the Bible story for this session? Is it vengeance? Abuse? Chaos? A precursor of the kindness to come? Or something else?

3. What do you think about these possible motives at work in each story?

   The good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37) helped the wounded man because he wanted to be forgiven for something bad he had done. Agree or disagree, and why?

   God saved Isaac from being murdered by Abraham because a ram was found to sacrifice instead of the boy (Genesis 22:1-19). Agree or disagree, and why?

   Before the loving father welcomed the prodigal son home (Luke 15:11-32), he made him confess his sins. Agree or disagree, and why?

Joseph wanted to frighten his brothers as vengeance for their treatment of him (Genesis 42:6-25). Agree or disagree, and why?

The Word Today

1. Whom do you try to forgive, but your anger and desire for vengeance get in the way?

Closing Prayer

Gracious and holy God, lead us from death to life, from falsehood to truth. Lead us from despair to hope, from fear to trust. Lead us from hate to love, from war to peace. Let peace fill our hearts, our world, our universe; through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen. (ELW, *p. 76*)

Further Study

John 13:34-35; 2 Corinthians 5:16-19; 1 John 2:7-11

Daily Readings

M. Psalm 51:1-12
T. Luke 23:9-15
W. Genesis 42:1-5
T. Genesis 42:26-28
F. Genesis 42:29-34
S. Genesis 42:35-38
S. Genesis 42:6-25

Memorization

Genesis 42:21a

They said to one another, "Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen."