



"I am Joseph, Your Brother"

Genesis 45:1-11, 15

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February 18, 2007

Last Sunday after the Epiphany

Joseph had his evil brothers right where he wanted them. It was time for revenge. He'd waited a very long time to exact retribution on his brothers. He knew the truth of that famous aphorism, "Revenge is a dish best served cold."

Joseph's life is part of a sordid, twisted family drama. It's a story that features greed, avarice, jealousy, violence, sex, power politics, and palace intrigue. Ten chapters long, the Joseph story is a disturbing tale about some very disturbing people – very ordinary people. And in it all God was at work – writing straight with crooked lines!

Joseph was born into a polygamous family. His ten older brothers were children of their father's least favored wife. Joseph was the late born first child of his father's favorite wife. You can see the trouble coming.

Pampered, adored and protected, Joseph was a homeboy who hung around his mother's kitchen and played in his father's office. His older brothers did the hard, backbreaking labor of a large cattle and sheep ranch.

Joseph's status and privilege was underscored by the famous coat his father bought for him. You may have heard it called his "coat of many colors," but a better translation is "coat with sleeves." Coats with sleeves were the clothing of royalty and people of high standing. Working men wore sleeveless coats, the better for outdoor work.

Joseph flaunted his favorite son status. He taunted his older brothers with tales of his dreams in which they were his servants bowing before him. They called him "dreamer" and they despised him. Joseph enjoyed rubbing it in. He bore the smug arrogance of moral and social superiority. And what is more alienating than someone else's sense of superiority?

The story puts it bluntly, "Joseph's brothers hated him." Their hate waited for an opportunity.

When the local pasture was exhausted, the brothers moved the herds to greener pastures far from home. Foolishly, Jacob, their father, sent Joseph to see how they and the herds were faring. More foolishly, Joseph wore his rich man's coat.

The brothers spotted Joseph coming. "Here comes the dreamer," one said. They saw opportunity right before their eyes and quickly hatched a plot. They would be rid of their hated brother forever. They would kill him. Who would ever know?

One of the eldest of the brothers convinced the others there was a better and safer way to be rid of Joseph. They decided to sell him to nearby slave traders on their way to Egypt.

In Egypt, they sold Joseph to Potiphar, a wealthy government official. Joseph was a house slave who used his experience in a family business to advantage. He became the steward of Potiphar's household. He managed the house and all the assets of the household.

Joseph managed things well and earned the trust of Potiphar. Potiphar had little to do except lie about the house eating and drinking while Joseph kept things running efficiently.

Maybe that's why Potiphar's wife noticed the skilled and attractive young Hebrew slave. Bored and, perhaps, neglected, she set out to seduce Joseph. Repeatedly, she invited Joseph to her bed and each time Joseph refused. It wasn't that he was a prude; rather, it was a matter of trust. Potiphar trusted Joseph with everything in his household, and Joseph would not betray that trust.

Spurned one too many times, Potiphar's wife accused Joseph of rape. Potiphar immediately sent Joseph to Pharaoh's prison. It was the bottom of a horrid downward spiral from favored son to convicted felon. Joseph languished in prison for nearly a decade, more than a third of his life.

He made himself useful in prison. Joseph made friends with the warden and assisted in managing the prison. He befriended fellow prisoners, most of whom were victims of political palace intrigue. Joseph made the best of a very bad situation.

Being useful and making friends worked at long last. A freed political prisoner told Pharaoh about the bright young Hebrew prisoner and recommended him. It seems that in prison Joseph cleverly interpreted dreams, a highly valued skill in that world. The current Pharaoh needed a dream interpreter and decided to give Joseph a chance as one of his advisors. Joseph was thirty years old. The worst was behind him. He knew for a fact a lesson quite difficult to learn, the worst times in life are not the last times. There is always another day.

Joseph quickly rose in the palace hierarchy. He proposed to Pharaoh a plan for alleviating the worst effects of the periodic famines that plague the Near East. Pharaoh agreed and placed Joseph in charge of the program.

Joseph held back twenty percent of all grain harvested until there was a seven-year supply. The grain was held in reserve and stored in large storage facilities scattered around the country.

Just as Joseph predicted, famine struck. Back home in Canaan, Joseph's family was out of luck and out of food. Jacob heard grain was available in Egypt and sent his sons and a mule train for a supply. A man of some means, he figured even a foreigner could buy grain.

When they arrived in Egypt, they reported to Joseph's office to learn how they might obtain food. Joseph recognized them in the line. It was too good to be true. It was a perfect chance for revenge on these animals who wanted to kill him and sold him to slavers.

We understand, don't we? What is more natural, more human than vengeance? The desire for revenge is embedded deep in the human spirit. At best, it's a survival mechanism. At worst, vengeance becomes slaughter.

All of us share the desire to strike back, to punish those who hurt us, to get even and settle scores. We learn revenge in families, practice it on playgrounds, perfect it in social

settings from bars to ballrooms, and practice revenge in business, politics, religion, courtrooms, and relationships.

National policies are often aimed at revenge. I still recall the chilling words of former Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Began, "We will cut off the arm of the hand that strikes us." After 9/11, most Americans wanted revenge.

The desire for revenge is so powerful that human legal systems are necessary to regulate it. At the least, the system attempts to exact punishment in proportion to the crime.

Most of the human desire for vengeance is much closer to home. We nourish revenge in daydreams. I can remember hurts inflicted decades ago, and the memory stirs up old dreams of getting even.

Few of us have the opportunity presented to Joseph. When he recognized his brothers, he went right to work. He harshly accused them of being spies from Canaan. They protested, he taunted them, accusing them more fiercely. No matter their protests, he threw them all in jail.

He let them stew in jail while he plotted his revenge. He sent all of them home with grain but kept one of his brothers in prison. He told them to come back with their only other brother, the son of Joseph's mother. Then, and only then, would he set the imprisoned brother free. Then he had his servants put the money his brothers had paid for the grain inside their sacks of grain.

Of course the brothers discovered the money in their sacks and were terrified. They didn't dare go back to Egypt. It didn't matter if their brother was in prison. Who knew what that devious minister of food and famine might do next? Besides, Jacob simply refused to let the little brother go. He'd lost one son of his beloved wife and declared he could not continue to live if he lost the other.

But the food ran out, and the famine continued. With no other hope, Jacob and sons decided to risk their lives and go back. They took money, gifts and little brother, Benjamin. They left behind their aged father in anguish, certain he'd never see them again.

Trembling, they arrived at Joseph's office. Now Joseph had them. Ah, sweet revenge. But not until a bit more torment.

Joseph invited his brothers to dinner. When he saw little brother, Benjamin, he was overcome and had to leave the room. But he wasn't finished with the older, evil brothers yet. He told them he forgave them for stealing their money back and hiding it in their grain. He sold them more grain and sent them on their way – but not before putting their money in the grain sacks and hiding his silver chalice in one of Benjamin's sacks.

When they'd been gone for a few hours, Joseph sent his servant after to accuse them of stealing his chalice and to warn them that whoever stole it would become his slave. The chalice was discovered in Benjamin's sack just as Joseph planned.

The servant hauled them back to Joseph. The oldest brother, Judah, begged for mercy and offered to exchange himself for Benjamin's life. Their father could not survive the grief, he said.

This was Joseph's long awaited moment of revenge. They were his to enslave, execute or and/or torture.

But deep inside Joseph another urge was stirring. His love for Benjamin and their father rose up to challenge his passion for revenge. And, it seems, he was also reflecting on God's amazing grace to him through his years in Egypt.

Joseph fled from the room and sobbed openly. When he composed himself he came back to the room a different man. He invited his brothers to come close, to invade the royal space between him and them and, perhaps, to offer them a closer look at his face.

"I am Joseph, your brother," he confessed. "Do not be afraid. I won't harm you. I no longer need revenge." Then Joseph added to that act of astonishing forgiveness with mercy upon mercy. He told them to go get their father and bring him to Egypt. "I will take care of you all as long as you live," he promised. They didn't ask for mercy. They didn't deserve forgiveness. Joseph simply gave it for no good reason except it was right.

There is no accounting for those acts of forgiving mercy except to say that Joseph learned another behavior from God. Rather than take his pattern of behavior from those who victimized him, he patterned his behavior after God. He discovered that the norms and values of the kingdom of God are more powerful than the norms and values of ordinary human behavior. Grace is greater than sin. Love is more powerful than hate. The mercy of forgiveness overpowers the need for vengeance.

And, he stopped the cycle of vengeance. Vengeance spirals upward until someone decides it must stop, and that requires forgiveness. Vengeance seldom "works." Its cost in human suffering and death can be incalculable. The only benefit seems to be that we feel better.

Joseph learned something more powerful. He was finally rid of the burden that corroded his soul, shrunk his heart, and likely controlled his life.

Jesus said, "Love your enemies." That means doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who abuse us. Or, to summarize, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." That is, don't judge; instead, forgive and above all, give. Give mercy, give forgiveness, give love.

I don't think Jesus is describing national foreign policy or a revised judicial system. Jesus is forming a new and alternative community in which the powerful human tendency to alienate is replaced by an ethic of reconciliation. Jesus is not suggesting passivity in the face of evil but, rather, he commissions his people to confront evil with aggressive love. He doesn't promise that it will always turn back evil. But often it does. Martin Luther King demonstrated the power of such aggressive love and mercy. He proved that people on their knees refusing to strike back are more powerful than fire hoses, attack dogs, and communities of hate.

The award winning film, "The Mission," of a few years ago illustrates the power of forgiving love. The story takes place in a remote South American village high in the mountains, accessible only by scaling a long dangerous cliff.

A priest, played by Jeremy Irons, settles in the village and forms a little church. The village is being transformed by the gospel of Christ.

A vicious slave trader, Rodrigo Mendosa, played brilliantly by Robert DeNiro, repeatedly raids the village for potential slaves to sell in the nearest colonial city. Often he kills villagers for the sport of it.

Mendosa is so twisted, he kills his own brother in a bar fight over a girl. In prison he comes face to face with himself and realizes the monster he has become. He refuses to talk, eat, or drink.

Plymouth Church of the Pilgrims
Sermon 2/18/07

The priest from the village comes to visit and offer him penance and redemption. He must come to the village and serve the people there. Mendosa at first refuses declaring he is beyond redemption.

Finally, the priest convinces him to come. His penance is to drag his armor, the tools of his trade, in a net connected by a long rope all the way to the village. When they come to the cliff, Mendosa begins the long agonizing climb to the top, his heavy burden hanging from him. The scene in the movie is an excruciating eight minutes long. He falls, gets up, falls again, but keeps climbing.

When he reaches the top, the villagers are waiting. It appears the men of the village will kill him. A man with a long knife kneels beside the exhausted Mendosa and places his knife at his neck. But instead of cutting his throat, he cuts the rope tied to Mendosa's armor and kicks the burden off the cliff.

Mendosa sobs as the village welcomes him into their midst, a forgiven man. That is the work of the people of God – because it is God's work.

Most of us face the need to forgive in less dramatic fashion. My doctoral supervisor gave me excellent guidance, but he also tormented me. I was his teaching fellow and an object of humiliation. Often I carried his books to class, and once he took a quick turn into the men's room where I stood as he relieved himself still giving me instructions for the day.

To make a long story shorter, a few years ago, I attended a conference at the school where he was, at the time, one of the deans. I decided to go see him. As I climbed up the long circular stairway in the administration building, all those old emotions of humiliation mixed with gratitude rose up within me. Jesus' words about forgiveness accompanied them. As I made my way up the stairs, I forgave him and it seemed an enormous load fell from my shoulders.

I was free – until the next time I climb those stairs. The work of forgiveness is long, difficult, and seldom complete. It is our work.

Amen.

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