

# THE REALITY OF RESTORATION

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Text: Genesis 45:1-15

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## SCRIPTURE

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Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. <sup>2</sup> And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. <sup>3</sup> Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. <sup>4</sup> Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. <sup>9</sup> Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. <sup>10</sup> You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. <sup>11</sup> I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ <sup>12</sup> And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. <sup>13</sup> You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” <sup>14</sup> Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. <sup>15</sup> And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

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## SERMON

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I have lived most of my life in the Midwest. I grew up in a small town with one Presbyterian Church, one Lutheran Church, one Methodist Church, one Catholic church, and a whole lot Baptists. As a pastor’s kid I lived in a bubble. I thought all Presbyterians were like me and all Lutherans like Pastor Larry from across the street. That bubble burst my first year of college in Missouri. I remember it very clearly even today. I knew no one and I was standing in line to buy my books at the bookstore. I heard the student in front of me talk about his father being the Lutheran pastor in town. I was so excited to meet another PK thinking he would be a friend and so I said to him, “my parents are pastors too!” And then he made some disparaging comment about how women aren’t allowed to be pastors and walked off. I remember feeling crushed and confused because I knew Pastor Larry didn’t believe that. Come to find out he was Missouri Synod Lutheran and they do not allow women’s ordination. For better and for worse, I realized just how many different views...different perspectives...different understandings of the Bible there were out there.

Well, I am experiencing some of those same feelings now as I did then. I’m saddened, angry and confused. It is easy here in Iowa, in the heart of the Midwest, to have the false sense of living in a bubble, removed from the kind of thing that happened in Charlottesville and a little part of me does feel as though a bubble has popped. All week I have wrestled with how to respond to the growing racist and hateful rhetoric and ideology that was present last weekend and that seems to be spreading. The group of clergy that get together on Wednesday mornings that Howard and I are a part of gave differing views of this matter. I was hoping that after our clergy group met I would have some clarity but I am still left with questions.

With these feelings and questions I turned to the scripture reading for this morning. A lot happens between last week when Joseph's brothers plot to kill him, throw him in a pit, strip him of his humanity and sell him into slavery, and this week's text so I want to take a few minutes to give you the Reader's Digest version. Joseph becomes the overseer of all of his fellow slaves. But then he is thrown into jail on a trumped up charge of sexual assault when he refuses the advances of Potiphar's wife.

While he is in prison though, we learn that Joseph is skilled in dream interpretation, and, upon interpreting Pharaoh's dream, he advises Pharaoh to store up 20% of the harvest in the seven years of abundance in order to feed the people when the seven years of famine arrive. He then becomes Pharaoh's second-in-command.

But, the roller coaster that is Joseph's life continues and in chapter 42 his family life and his work life collide. Facing starvation in Canaan, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy some of the grain hoarded there. Joseph sees his brothers and recognizes them immediately but they do not recognize him.

Joseph is not ready to confront his brothers just yet and decides not to reveal who he truly is to them. Instead, Joseph makes his brothers jump through a few hoops...perhaps to test their intentions. So, he pretends not to know them, accuses them of spying, throws them all in jail for three days, and has Simeon bound and held in Egypt until the other brothers bring Benjamin.

When they eventually return again, this time with Benjamin, Joseph has his own silver cup slipped into Benjamin's sack, setting him up for a charge of stealing. Judah, who was the one who lobbied for selling Joseph rather than killing him, steps in to plead for Benjamin's release for the sake of their father Jacob.

Now, after all of that we have finally come to our text for this morning where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and provides reconciliation and restoration to his family. Now Joseph certainly had every right to deny his brothers the food they requested. And we see through all those other chapters between last week and this week that Joseph was on the edge...he was right on the line. But his desire to seek revenge, to do to them what they had done to him was overcome by his love for them. So Joseph chose to do the right and just thing. To not respond with violence or more hate...to not let his brothers, his nieces and nephews and all that they love starve. In fact, Joseph recognizes that this is why he was given his gift of dreams...to preserve and save his family. From the moment he saw his brothers to now it had all been building up. And throughout all the back and forth with his brothers, Joseph secretly wept, overwhelmed with emotion that all came rushing out in this moment of the big reveal.

I imagine that the brothers were quite shocked at what Joseph was saying. In fact, they are speechless because until we get to verse 15 Joseph was doing all the talking. And so far as they could tell, there was no anger or bitterness...there was no hint of revenge. Instead, Joseph spoke kindly to them and showed every intention of treating them well. He even promised to provide for them and their children through the coming years of famine.

As I read this story I am struck by Joseph's ability in this moment to step back and look at the bigger picture. I am in awe of the way he simply let go of the anger and resentment. Now the brothers are never quite sure but Joseph never shows any malice towards his brothers even after their father Jacob's death.

In light of the events of the past week with growing tension over the white supremacy movement, the debate over the removal of confederate statues, and the terrorist attack that killed 14 people in Barcelona, how do we stay in relationship with people who disagree with us...our neighbors, our friends, our family, the person in the next pew? How do we respond to the kind of evil and hatred that seeks to divide us?

Tony Campolo tells of a time when he was asked to speak at a peace rally in Portadown, Northern Ireland, a place where the struggles and division between the Catholics and the Protestants have been going on for hundreds of years. He writes:

The anger and the violence between those two groups is something that is world known. As I came into the city hall at Portadown I was stunned because the chairs were arranged in a frightening manner. On one side there were chairs facing in towards the center in which all the Protestants were seated. On the other side there were chairs on which all the Catholics were seated. I thought, "Oh my. They can't even get together for this peace rally!" I didn't understand what was about to happen.

A man stood and said, "I'm a Protestant. Over the years I've hated Catholics. Over the years I've despised them and I've done terrible things to Catholics that I can't even name. Will you forgive me?" And the Catholics on the other side said with one voice, "In the name of Jesus, we forgive you."

Men on the Catholic side stood and said, "I've done terrible, terrible things. I've been a terrorist. I was a member of the IRA. I set off bombs and I'm asking you to forgive me. I have come to know Jesus as my Savior and my Lord and I'm asking you for forgiveness." And the Protestants with one voice said, "We forgive you." It went back and forth like that for an hour. It was incredible!

The last man was in a wheelchair, without any legs. He said, "I always hated Protestants. But when I turned on the ignition of my car and a bomb went off and I lost my legs, I hated them with such an intensity that I wanted to kill every one I could see! And then my priest prayed with me and I invited the spirit of Christ to come in and he has transformed me. I have forgiven the man who did this to me."

A Protestant man stood on the other side and said, "He's telling you the truth. I'm the one who set the bomb and he has forgiven me." The Catholic man in the wheelchair spoke up again and said, "He's only telling you part of the story. The reality is this: my wife died two years ago and I had no place to go, no one to care for me. My Protestant friend has been changed by the same Jesus that changed me. When he found out that I was all alone, he invited me to live with him and he's been taking care of me ever since. We have become brothers in Christ."

The story of Joseph is ultimately a story of grace and forgiveness. Campolo continues with this: "The Bible talks about grace, the forgiveness that comes because of the grace of God. Do any of you know what grace means?" This one boy with a kind of sheepish smile said, "Well, if a cop waves you over to the side of the road for speeding and comes over and gives you a ticket because you were speeding that's justice. If he comes over and gives you a warning and lets you go, that's mercy. But after he waves you over to the side of the road for speeding, comes over to the side of the road and gives you a Krispy Kreme Donut, that's grace!"

That's grace. It's giving what in fact is not deserved. Joseph gave his brothers what they did not deserve...grace, the same grace God gives each of us. So, how will we respond to a society that still has too much racism in it? What is the right and just response to those who hurt us...who disagree with us? How will we give grace to those who seemingly don't deserve it...to a world full of anger and hatred? May each of us, like Joseph, live into the reality of restoration.