

July 1 – Confronting your Past

Genesis 42 1-7, 19-24, 29

The story of Joseph has now come full circle. Because of the famine, his brothers come to Egypt to buy grain. It appears that Joseph has been expecting this, for when the brothers enter Egypt they are brought directly into Joseph's presence. We can assume that Joseph did not have time to personally sell grain to every foreigner coming for food. This confrontation is one he has been anticipating. The situation is totally reversed from the last time he encountered his brothers. Joseph now has the power and the brothers are at the mercy of his decisions. Both Joseph and his brothers are confronting their past. As the brothers bow down to him, Joseph remembers the dream he had many years before. A dream, in the telling, that ignited emotions of anger and jealousy in the men bowing before him. The brothers do not guess that Joseph is the one they are addressing. He speaks to them harshly through an interpreter. He looks and acts as if he were an Egyptian from birth.

Sometimes life presents us with such moments as Joseph experienced. You are in charge instead of just a participant. What goes through your mind at such times? Do you recall past slights and see this as a time to get even? Do you relish your moment of power? Do you just accept the situation for what it is and move on? We do not know what Joseph was feeling, but we can assume he was not filled with overflowing love for his brothers. We know this because he doesn't announce whom he is immediately.

Many scholars believe Joseph's actions, though harsh, are about healing the breach between him and his brothers. He cannot simply speak to them because he does not know if they have grown in maturity and faith as he has grown. He must set up situations that will enable him to observe them. These situations will mirror their treatment of him, forcing the issue into the front of their consciousness. Joseph experiences many emotions. The scriptures don't say so but could he help but have an ironic smile when, to his challenge that they are spies, the brothers continually express that they are men of honesty and integrity. They are saying this to one they stripped and sold into slavery! Joseph's harsh questioning has its desired effect. It brings out the information that he wanted. He learns that his father and youngest brother are alive.

Even more, it leads the brothers into confessional reflection. They assume the harsh treatment they are getting is a punishment for their earlier treatment of their brother. All of this is too much for Joseph. He has to leave them and after shedding tears, returns.

He is still not convinced that they have changed, so there will be more tests. First he wants to see if the brothers are jealous of Benjamin as they had been of Joseph. He says that all but one must stay until the freed brother returns with their youngest brother. Then after being in prison for three days he shows a bit of mercy, selects Simon to remain, and sends the rest back for Benjamin. Will they sacrifice another brother to save their skins? Will they sacrifice Benjamin? He is anxious to see. More testing awaits. And, we are not sure why, he has the money that they had used to purchase the grain placed in their sacks. Was it a gesture of kindness? Or, was he making it harder for them to return because they could be accused of thievery. We don't know. What is clear is Joseph believes that they have to confront their past before there can be reconciliation.

When I think about this story and what it says to me today, I hear it challenging me to look carefully at relationships I have had in the past that soured. As I have said, we likely have not faced devastating betrayals, as was experienced by Joseph, but we have had people treat us unkindly, say hurtful things to us or about us, and dealt with us in less than ethical ways. They might be, like in Joseph's case, family members. It can just as easily be friends or coworkers. We have these experiences and at times we come to that moment where we need to deal with them directly. The person is asking for forgiveness, or asking us to trust them or have moved on and want us to let go of the issues of the past as well. What do we do? What does Joseph teach us?

The first of these is that past deeds do bring present consequences both good and bad. We see some of this in the actions of the brothers. When they are accused of being spies they feel this harsh treatment might be a punishment for what they did to Joseph. Later when they see the money in their sacks it strikes fear in them. Guilt, causes all of us to react to present life experiences in sometimes less than healthy ways. We need to be aware of that when dealing with someone who might feel guilty about something in the past. There were consequences for Joseph as well. He now was

mistrustful of his brothers. He felt the need to test them and see if, or how, the years had changed them. When we begin to think about reconciliation we need to be aware of the baggage from the past that is present. We should not let it control us but an awareness is a good and helpful thing.

The second thing this says to me is that we do need to confront the past. To just move on as if nothing has happened buries the event but does not heal the wound. Sometimes, the one who has committed the deed wants to do this. It is not ultimately helpful. This is often where there are roadblocks because dealing with past issues in some form is challenging. Without some acknowledgement of the pain caused, the damage to relationships that occurred, or whatever was hurtful, there is ultimately no healing.

A third message is that it is all right to be wary but we still need to be willing to forgive. Joseph was not going to offer forgiveness and reconciliation until he knew more about his brothers. For today, we need to hear that we need not rush into every situation feeling that we must forgive at that moment just because we are asked to. Some people are abusive with power. So, a bit of caution, keeping up boundaries, is acceptable as long as they are not used as excuses for not moving closer, for ultimately offering forgiveness. This is moving beyond the old mantra, "Hurt me once shame on you, hurt me twice shame on me." Yes, we might get hurt a second time. Sometimes, even when we test and forgive we end up being hurt again. Hearing a call to be wary when moving back towards one who has wronged us is a word we need to hear.

Finally, this story is a reminder to not be abusive with power when things change. As we will see, Joseph gets close to the line in how he treats his brothers. I would have wished a bit more compassion and a bit less testing. But I do celebrate the fact that when he had all the power and could have punished them severely he held back. He worked towards a better future for them all. Retaliation is often a response that we feel when things change and we have to guard against it.

In thinking about this part of the Joseph story, I recall reading a story about a man who lost out on a promotion because someone whom he thought was a friend,

used some personal information that he had shared against him. This friend had told their boss about it and this led to the other person getting the job. He learned about it when the boss casually mentioned that he would have gotten the position except for... He left the company soon after feeling he did not want to work with this former colleague. Fast forward a decade and he is hiring for a position. He is surprised to see that one of the applicants is this former friend. The company he had left was bought out and this individual was let go. He now has all the power, what does he do with it? In this particular instance, he chose to not do the interview but let another on the team do so. From the interviews this man was selected as one of three finalists. He called him up to take him to lunch. He made it clear that they needed to talk about the past. The lunch was challenging but ultimately he came to believe that this individual had grown in maturity and would likely not do something like this again. He did not use his power to scuttle the interview. All three candidates were interviewed. They ranked them all and this individual was not given the job. When he called him up to explain he heard, "I trust the process because I trust you." He was willing to give him some other leads and soon found out he had a job. They were never close again, but felt good about how he had handled a challenging situation.

All of us come face to face with our past at times. Joseph gives us some good clues as to how to deal with it. Next week we are going to learn about forgiveness, how hard it is to offer it and how equally hard it is to believe that we have truly received it, no strings attached.