

June 10 – Sold and Tempted

Genesis 39:1-8, 11-13, 16-20

As we continue looking at the life of Joseph, we find him a slave in the house of a high-ranking Egyptian official. Just weeks, maybe a few months, before he was the spoiled and favored son of Jacob. He had a fancy coat that showed the world how special he was and he had been dreaming about how all, even his brothers and parents, would bow down to him. Now, betrayed and sold by his brothers, he is a slave. Fortunately for him, he was bought for work in a house instead of in the fields where the hot sun usually killed a man in a few seasons. Obviously, he had been educated by Jacob because soon he was given more and more duties until he is made overseer of the house. You could only have that kind of responsibility if you knew how to read and figure because you would be responsible for ordering supplies for the house and managing its funds.

We will look at these tumultuous times in Potiphar's house in more detail but the first question this part of the Joseph story asks me is, "What do you do when life brings you challenges?" As I said, this is not where Joseph wanted to be. It was not in his plans. He could have been sullen and angry. Instead, he set aside his arrogant youth and his self-centered behaviors and did all he could to the best of his abilities. It seems that this teenager grew up on that long walk to Egypt. Potiphar notices this positive frame of mind and also acknowledges that the Lord was with him. In all that he does he succeeds. It is surprising that an Egyptian acknowledges that Joseph's good character was because of his faith in his own God! Joseph truly tried to bloom where he was planted. You could say that this diligence and positive attitude allows God to work more effectively through him.

God, who is only alluded to in the first part of the Joseph drama, is now mentioned directly nine times as the events that happened at Potiphar's house are described. Joseph is now depicted as loyal, faithful, patient under stress, and filled with wisdom.

This part of Joseph's story makes you take a look at your life, doesn't it? I know it made me ask, "How have I responded when life has put me in places I didn't want to be, doing what I didn't want to do?" Did I respond in a way that God got the credit? Did I act in ways that allowed God to easily work through me? I hope I did, at least some of the time. But, I have to admit that sometimes my grumpy, woe-is-me self shows up instead. Joseph's story says use the gifts God has given you wherever life sets you down. If you do, people will notice.

A testament to how much Joseph has changed, when he is tempted he is able to resist. Potiphar's wife sees that Joseph is a handsome young man. She wants to sleep with him. Joseph is master of the house. None of the other slaves would have spoken against him. The only thing stopping him was the moral statutes that said it was wrong. Joseph refused and more importantly says that to do so would be a sin against God. He was not concerned that Potiphar would find out. He was wishing to be faithful to God, who now seems to be his one source of comfort in this new and different life that he is now living. His faith allows him to keep boundaries and resist temptations. He said no to her not just once but many times. Joseph appears genuinely vulnerable in this story and could have failed even with God's presence and the divine intention for success. It is a testament to his character and his faith that he continues to say no.

Joseph learned, what is a truth for all of us, that some people do not respect a strong moral response. Instead, they feel thwarted and judged and so lash out. Being faithful and having others realize God is with you does not mean that you will prosper. Sometimes just the opposite happens.

One day she finds Joseph alone and again propositions him. When he refuses she grabs his garment and he wriggles out of it leaving it in her hands. Most scholars believe that he would have been wearing the traditional wrap around short skirt known as the shendyt, which was belted at the waist, sometimes pleated or gathered in the front. If this was the case then he would have run naked from her. She then accuses Joseph of trying to molest her to the other servants. She ups the ante by reminding them he was a foreigner and so his actions was an affront not just to her but to all the Egyptians in the house. When Potiphar comes home she ratchets it up another notch by

reminding him that he was the one who purchased Joseph, he was the one who put him in authority, so by implication Potiphar is to blame that she was attacked in her own house. He reacts just as she expected. He does not even hear Joseph's side of the account. He has him thrown into prison. This actually shows some restraint on his part because he could have had Joseph executed for the supposed crime.

You would think, after all of this, that Joseph would become bitter and angry with God. Yet even in prison he continues to try and make the best of things and people see that God is with him, and he is again given more and more responsibility. Joseph doesn't know it, but all of these events are placing him in a position to be used by God to save an entire country.

Who Joseph is and what Joseph does makes a difference to God's work in the world. In turn, God's work in Joseph enables him to mature and develop in ways that would not otherwise be possible. Joseph is learning that faithfulness does not always mean prosperity. Sometimes, being faithful actually puts you in a situation where you are attacked. But even if you do not prosper, in your faithfulness you open yourself up to being used by God, which allows possibilities to unfold that you have no idea are out there and ultimately people notice.

Let me share an example. There was an older couple in one of my first congregations. They had seven children. As mom and dad aged it became apparent that they could not live alone much longer. Several of the children got together and decided that their sister should move home. She had recently gone through a divorce; her children were raised and so, to their thinking, unattached and could do this. She was scheduled to be visiting her parents a few weeks later. While she was there the rest of the siblings came home and announced to her, in front of their parents, that they had all decided that she should move home. She was taken aback by what was occurring, wishing someone had talked to her, but she decided right then and there to do what they asked. She sold her house and moved home. Dad passed soon afterwards but mom lived on becoming more challenging as the years went by. Yet this woman always tried to be positive. She did what she could at the church to help others. She had many opportunities to do good in that little community. She read to several people whose

eyesight was going and wrote letters for them to family as well. She once said to me, “I didn’t want to come home, but I have found it to be a very fulfilling thing for me.” All were impressed by her sweet spirit and her faith.

Diligence and faith allow God to work through us. Sometimes it is in places we do not choose and doing things we do not wish to do. But doing them well and faithfully is a reward in its own right. Also, we need to understand the boundaries in our situation and this keeps us from falling into temptations. In Joseph’s case it was clarity about power and sex in the house he ran. For us it might be an understanding that we need space in care giving so we can do our best, or that someone pushes our buttons and so we have to work at not reacting to them. Whatever are our temptations, be aware and set up clear boundaries that you do not cross them.

Faithfulness does not always mean prosperity. People notice though how you handle adversity. People see the faith you have and are impressed even if they don’t say so. Most of all, it is a challenge to see how God is using us in this place and time and then doing our best.