

Genesis 37-50

Joseph Matures into Greatness

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The Congregational Church of Needham

Exploring the past is like putting on snorkels and swimming on the surface of the oceans of time. As we search for the life on the sandy floor of faith we begin to focus on different characters that shaped our tradition. As we study these characters, which lie so deeply buried in the past we often discover that these stories are the true hidden treasures lying there waiting to be discovered. When we explore their riches they teach us things about the past and also about the present. They offer wisdom for our lives too, wisdom that feeds the currents and deep rivers of our understanding of what it means to be human today.

This week we look at the story of Joseph. We have all heard the tale about the conceited boy with the ostentatious overcoat, but the story of Joseph is more complex. Joseph grows from an arrogant child into a wise and powerful leader. How does he do it? He transforms himself and grows into his fullest potential the only way you really can- the hard way.

Last week we learned that Jacob had 12 sons and 1 daughter. He trusted his boy with his large flocks of goats and sheep and they ran his large estate. Now Jacob had grown up in a home when his mother loved him best, and Jacob had his favorites too. His favorite wife was Rachel and he loved Rachel's children better than the others. He doted on Joseph and bought him an incredible tunic made from expensive cloth. By the time he was a teenager Joseph had become very conceited.

Joseph was a dreamer and learned to analyze his dreams. One day he told his family that he dreamed that when the wheat was tied up at the harvest his bundles were straight but theirs were bending in homage to his. He dreamed that the sun, moon and the eleven stars prostrated before him.

Even Jacob was offended by his son's hubris and said, sarcastically, "Perhaps I and your mother will have to revere you too." Not long after that, Jacob sent his sons out to the fields, but the older boys did not return so he sent Joseph out to find out if everything was alright.

When the older boys saw Joseph coming they resented him so much they began to discuss how to teach him a lesson. Some of the brothers fantasized killing him. But the oldest boy, Reuben, did not want to hurt Joseph, so he suggested they put him into a big pit, which would be safer but still teach him some humility. So they put Joseph in a dry well and Reuben went to check on the flocks, leaving some of the younger brothers to watch Joseph. Before long a caravan came by and his brothers decided to sell Joseph as a slave. They rationalized that he would learn humility by serving strangers.

It seemed like a great revenge until they had to tell their father that Joseph was missing. Pouring blood on the beautiful coat they lied to Jacob and informed him that his favorite son had been attacked by wild animals. Their father was inconsolable; the depth of his sorrow was evident to everyone.

Meanwhile Joseph was purchased as a slave for Potiphar- chief of Pharaoh's guardsmen. Like his father before him, Joseph knew how to work hard when the chips were down. Also like Jacob, Joseph had the gift for business. Before long, he was in charge of all the servants in the home of the Pharaoh's guardsman. Soon he caught the eye of Potiphar's wife, who tried to seduce him. Many servants have been the victim of advances from the ruling class, and Joseph understood that he needed to avoid her but when he did she was offended and accused him of assaulting her; so Joseph landed back in jail.

Despite his bad luck, Joseph did not give into despair. The head of the prisons noticed his integrity and initiative, and put Joseph in charge of administering all the prisoners. While he was there he gained a reputation for his ability to interpret people's dreams. After several years Pharaoh had some dreams that no one could understand. His cupbearer recalled that he had met Joseph in prison and recommended Joseph to the Pharaoh. They sent for the slave and summoned him to Pharaoh's court.

Pharaoh recounted his dream to Joseph, "I was by the river when I saw seven fat and beautiful cows coming up. Behind them came seven skinny and ugly cows, so bone thin I had never seen anything so skinny and sorry looking in my entire kingdom. These cows ate the fat ones up and after that they were still skinny." At that time I woke up. Then I went back to sleep. I saw seven wonderful and lovely wheat shoots coming from the same step. Behind them, however, were seven sorry looking and thin shoots. They swallowed the good ones up. The dream ended there."

Joseph was clear about his intuition and where it came from. He said, "My God, the Lord, will be the one to interpret the dreams through my words, your majesty. The two dreams have the same meaning. The seven fat cows as well as the seven good shoots represent seven years of prosperity and abundance. You are responsible for your people and God sent this dream to warn you that starting now

there will be a good period, but it will be followed by a bad period, a time of tribulation and trial when there will be so much hunger that the famine will erase the memory of the years of abundance. You must entrust your nation's destiny to a prudent administrator who will plan for this famine. Gather and store 1/5 of the abundant harvests to create a reserve that you can draw on in the lean years. "

Pharaoh was impressed, and declared "I don't know your god but he has prevented the extinction of my people. So I appoint you, Joseph, governor of the kingdom and during the years of abundance." Joseph gathered the harvests and stored them in great barns. He married the king's daughter and had 2 sons. The lean years came without warning and took the whole region by surprise. Word got out that Egypt had stored wheat and refugees started to appear. In Israel people suffered too and Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy grain. His brothers went before Joseph to buy wheat; he saw who they were but they did not recognize him.

When he saw them Joseph was angry and his rage boiled up so he treated his brothers as strangers. He tested their character and accused them of being spies, but they had changed too and they were horrified. He told them he did not trust them, and insisted on keeping one of them, Simeon, as a hostage until they returned again, so that they would know he meant business. The brothers talked together in their language, saying this governor's distrust was their punishment for what they did to Joseph. Unknown to them, Joseph understood what they were saying and was touched. He was on the brink of making himself known to them, but ordered Simeon to be tied up and told them not to return without the youngest Benjamin. Their father, Jacob, was reluctant to let his youngest go to Egypt. With Joseph gone, Benjamin was especially fond of his youngest son. But without food they'd all perish. Jacob sent them with his blessing and a prayer "I place you in God's hands and only hope God will soften the heart of this Egyptian governor."

When they arrived in Egypt, Joseph had his servants invite his brothers to dine in his home, but the brothers were nervous thinking this was a trick. When Joseph arrived the brothers humbled themselves before him, as the original dream had predicted they would. But Joseph asked about their elderly father, and wanted to meet the youngest Benjamin. When he laid eyes on Benjamin Joseph was overcome with emotion. He fed them a great meal and sent them on their way with grain to spare.

To test them again he instructed his steward to plant his own precious cup in Benjamin's grain sacks and then had his steward accuse Benjamin of theft, and ordered him to remain in Egypt. The brothers were horrified and all offered to serve as servants in his stead. In that moment Joseph was

satisfied that his brothers had grown kinder; so he revealed his true identity to them. They were astonished and could not take it all in.

Joseph said “I know it is hard for you to believe. I am your brother, whom you sold into slavery to a caravan of traders traveling to Egypt. Don’t be afraid. You have shown such great remorse, and I believe that God used this mistake you made to bring about good. God used my ability to interpret dreams, the very ability you hated when I was a boy, to allow me to interpret Pharaoh’s dreams so we could prepare for the famine and rescue many people in this region from hunger, my own family among them. Where is my father? Would you bring him here so we can be re-united?” They went home with the news for old Jacob that his son Joseph was alive and thriving. So the whole tribe of Jacob- people living in Canaan (which is now Israel) moved to Egypt, where they made their home for many generations.

What can we learned from this story for our lives today? There is a lot going on here. It is a story about sibling rivalry and family jealousy, but it is also a story about growing up and about the marks of maturity. It is a story about change and what it takes to realize your human potential.

From the start, this is a story about a pretty dysfunctional family. Parents show favoritism; children lack respect - hubris; sibling jealousy turns to revenge. Everyone from Jacob on down is conceited and petty. In some ways it was a normal family, where the storyteller spared no details. Things just seemed a little chaotic until the brothers went too far. Then a tragedy stopped them in their tracks. To their credit the brothers learned from their mistakes. Joseph was a brat, and there was truth to the notion that becoming a servant taught him to be humble. Oddly, it was the making of him. Though his brothers did something unconscionable when they sold him into slavery they realized their mistake and lived with remorse. They understood too late, that they probably cost him his life, but they did not defend it. When they compounded their mistake by telling their father Joseph was dead they had to live with Jacob’s sorrow for years, and the emptiness no one could fill served as a reminder that revenge is never that sweet.

Growing up is never easy. It is a hard road that leads to maturity and greatness. But the knocks in life that make you humble teach you things you cannot learn any other way. The sign of maturity is self-awareness. I enjoyed all the sermons on Youth Sunday but I want to mention two of them today. I was very impressed by the way that Andrew Tegeler had the ability to reflect on his childhood at the church with humor and humility. He did not have to be so vulnerable, but his sense of humor

demonstrated that he does not take himself too seriously. His ability to talk about his childhood proved to be winning and it demonstrated remarkable maturity.

Joseph's story also says that when you are going through hard things in life the only way to redeem them is to strive to forgive and be open to the possibility that you cannot see everything. Another mark of maturity is to trust that there is more to be revealed. On Youth Sunday when Emma Findlay-Walters talked about her confirmation year, and how her faith deepened even as she was dealing with his parents' illness, her sermon captured the essence of faith. It is the ability to live with questions you cannot answer and trust that God is working in ways you cannot see; God is at work somewhere in the mix of your confusion. Faith is the ability to recognize the limits of human knowledge and understanding and yet to live with those limits trusting more will be revealed.

In my application for this job I wrote an essay saying that a minister's responsibility is simply to point to faith when I see it. So today, I point to Joseph. Joseph is a great example of what it means to be whole, to grow up, to live free of resentment and anger, and to grow in faith. He shows that trusting in God will make you great whether you end up a servant or a prisoner, or a great leader. I also see the signs of faith in all of you at different times and in different ways. I see the way you grow and change and find your way in faith. Thanks be to God. Thanks be to God.