

Genesis 50:15-21

*When Joseph's brothers saw that their father was dead, they said, "It may be that Joseph will hate us and pay us back for all the evil that we did to him." So they sent a message to Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this command before he died: 'Say to Joseph, "Please forgive the transgression of your brothers and their sin, because they did evil to you."' And now, please forgive the transgression of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him. His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, "Behold, we are your servants." But Joseph said to them, "Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones." Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them.*

Dear congregation!

When we hear this story, there are two maybe even three possible positions we can take, positions where we could identify and find ourselves in the story: we could possibly identify with Joseph's brothers and experience how unresolved issues of our past catch up with us, but also how recognizing and admitting our own responsibility for past hurts can free us up for forgiveness and open us up for new possibilities in our relationships. Or we could position ourselves on the side of Joseph, a person who experienced grievous wrong being done to him and finding it very difficult to get over the hurt. Or maybe we can identify with Jacob, the father, the parent trying to keep the family together, trying to keep the peace. I encourage you to find your spot in the story whilst you listen...

Up to this point in the Joseph story the father was still alive. He was the authority. He was the one who held the family together. He made sure that the differences between the brothers

didn't reach a point where they flare up and that old wounds were not scratched open again. As long as the father was alive there was peace and quiet. Parents have a way of holding a family of siblings together. Of course, if there is favoritism on your part where you may be more fond of one sibling over against another, or even a daughter-in-law or grandchild, the task of trying to avoid animosity can become exceedingly difficult.

The meaning of such father or mother figures in our families and in our society and the crises that their departure causes is familiar to us. More often than not, there are great crises that break out in families when a father or mother dies; the same goes for a society or a state, when a great leader retires or dies. In this extreme situation of trauma after the death of a loved one, old wounds have a way of flaring up again, the unresolved past catches up with us and rears its ugly head and has the potential of causing us great heart ache.

*"Now that our father is dead, Joseph could fall back and seek revenge for all the wrong that we did to him."* The brothers of Joseph were afraid. Joseph represents far more than just a name of a brother. Joseph is the crisis that set in when the father died, he is the bad memory of a great wrong that was committed in the past. He's a constant reminder of what has become a distant memory, now unpredictable and threatening. It's possible to simply ignore what has happened or try and forget about it and hope it will go away. But unresolved issues in our relationships have a way of cropping up again unexpectedly screaming for attention. Even if we try to ignore them, deep down we know that they follow us around like a shadow and ultimately, they catch up with us.

We can understand the fear of Joseph's brothers. It's a very uncomfortable feeling to live with these shadows of the past.

Of course, fear is not a good giver of advice, because fear tells us: wait for it to pass, keep quiet, don't say anything, it'll go away by itself. But, unfortunately it doesn't. This way, things only remain unresolved and over time they have a way of getting worse.

But, to their credit, the brothers of Joseph, after many, many years muster up the courage to speak truth, to take responsibility and own up to their part in the family drama: "*I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.*" For the very first time and only at the end of the story, do the brothers put words to their past actions; they speak the actual words of the wrong they had done – forgive the crime and the wrong we did in harming you. Owning up and taking responsibility for the wrong they have done in the past took great courage; admitting your guilt always means that you give something of yourself, it costs you something. This becomes clear when we see that the brothers fell down in front of Joseph. But at the same time, it is also a great opportunity to be released from the heavy burden of guilt and shame, an opportunity for something new, something better to happen in our relationships. Truth and truthfulness is important. So is the will to reconcile.

Of course, there is risk involved in being truthful. There's always the question of how the other person(s) will take it and what they will do with it. Will they take advantage of our vulnerability? That's why it does not only take courage to own up to the truth but also trust. Which brings us to the core of the message today.

The brothers said: "*Please forgive the crime of your servants of the God of your father.*" And Joseph said: "*Am I in the place of God. As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good.*" The will of God is and always has been to preserve, to save and to forgive all people, not to harm and destroy them.

The historical climax of this truth is the cross of Christ – here, if anywhere, is an act of evil: the crucifixion of the one person who lived a life undeserving of punishment of any kind. Yet even this horrific act was under God's good hand. Jesus was "*delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God*" (Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). This does not by any means exonerate the wicked actions that carry out such evil, but it does give us the broadest vision for what is happening at any given point of history, even when evil seems to triumph most horrifically. God is there. That goes for our own personal lives too, when we are not able to see that any good can possibly come out of the mess we find ourselves or those that we love in. We are never alone. God is with us. He is working out his redemptive purposes.

And when it is time for us to take courage and own up to the truth it helps to remember that Christ died for us while we were still sinners. Paul reminds us of this fact. God offered us forgiveness before we could even ask for it. This is the place where we can go to, to gather up courage and trust to face the truth and take the necessary steps towards healing in our broken relationships. Trust in God's mercy and forgiveness through our Lord Jesus Christ helps us to be courageous.

"*Do not fear*", says Joseph to his brothers. He does not abuse their vulnerability and trust. In fact, he cannot: "*Am I in the place of God?*" The answer to that question had to be no, for Joseph knew that he, a fallible human being himself, could not rule or judge in the place of God. He knew that he was just as dependent on God's forgiveness and grace as were his brothers. We dare not seek to share in judgment that belongs only to a holy God. To seek to do so is supreme folly. Yet at the culmination of redemptive history God became a man and put himself under judgment in the place of sinful humanity. This is supreme mercy.

And it is this supreme mercy of God that breaks the vicious circle of hurt, anger and vengeance. God's grace calls for forgiveness and reconciliation. It's not easy. Nowhere in this family drama does it say that it was easy. Only at the very end of this saga do the veils fall and the full truth of all that's happened was revealed and reconciled. Only at the end of the drama is light shed on the hidden Hand of God working through all the messed-up relationships, all the lies, deceit and dysfunctionality of the Jacob family to ultimately reveal how God turned evil events around and created a greater good out of them for everybody.

Is evil then made out to be relative and harmless in this Joseph story? No, by no means. There's no hiding from responsibility. It simply shows us that God and His good plan for our lives will not be held up by the evil doings of human beings – the Cross of Christ is the prime example of this. God will fulfil His good plan for our personal lives and for the whole of creation despite and even through evil. It may not seem like that to us now, depending on where we are at in our lives at this present moment. But until it does, our faith tells us that there is hope! Our faith invites us to trust that "*for those who love God all things work together for good*" as Paul reminds us in Romans 8:28. There is hope – for our own lives and for the world we live in. It is the hope that God will use all the mess, not against us, not to destroy us, but to enable new and redemptive possibilities for our future. This hope is grounded in the Grace of God that holds everything together even when it seems like it's all falling apart. From this point of view, we can with confidence say: "All's well that ends well." Praise be to God!

Amen.