

“Empowered to Reconcile”

Genesis 45:1-15
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I always love it when the lectionary texts for a given Sunday speak directly to situations in the world, situations desperately in need of a word of good news. As I began to write this sermon, Russia and Georgia reached an uneasy cease-fire. Iran took another step toward nuclear development. A suicide bomber killed two people in Baghdad. Palestinians and Israelis lobbed explosive devices at each other. Nations are feeling empowered to fight. Is anyone out there looking for empowerment to reconcile?

When we pick up the Joseph story in Genesis Chapter 45, we find him in Egypt having been elevated to the very powerful position of Secretary of Agriculture. He is in charge of all the food in Egypt. At his command, one person will be fed and another left hungry. He has more power than anyone else on the face of the earth with the exception of Pharaoh himself. Though he is a foreigner, and therefore an unlikely candidate for such high office, Joseph finds himself making decisions that will impact the future of millions of people for decades to come.

This is the same Joseph with the coat of many colors, the same Joseph thrown into a pit by his older brothers; the same Joseph sold to Ishmaelite camel drivers, the same Joseph who interpreted dreams, the same Joseph seduced by Potiphar's wife. This is Joseph, the eleventh of his parent's twelve sons. He is the favorite son of Jacob and Rachel.

What we see in this story is the beauty that comes into being when one person sets aside the power to exact revenge in order to use power to embrace reconciliation instead.

Joseph has his ten older brothers in the palm of his hand. Remembering how they hated him and threw him into a pit, he now has the political power to crush them like the heel of a boot crushing a cock roach. Remembering their selling him to Ishmaelite traders, he has the authority to erase them like chalk from a blackboard. Remembering their disowning him as one of their brothers, he has the clout to bury them in unmarked graves.

But revenge, though understandable, is not the only choice. Revenge is not the only option open to Joseph. It is never the only option. It is the option often chosen, but it does not hold the moral sway that reconciliation offers.

Joseph looks at the ten scoundrels and sees family. He stares upon the ten rascals and feels love. He studies the faces of the ten and knows it is the time for a reconciling word, an end to the sibling rivalry, a time for breaking the cycle of violence. Enough is enough! He could crush them on the spot, but he kisses them on the neck! He could wipe them out, but he hugs them for dear life. He could remind them of their treachery, but he asks about his parents. He could do them in, but he wept upon them instead.

Joseph chooses reconciliation over revenge, thus revealing the stuff he's made of. He is way ahead of his time. He is a spiritual giant, a theological breath of fresh air. Though many look to the Old Testament and see a vengeful God, here we see the evidence of a God whose whole everything is wrapped up in the gift of a reconciling heart. We see in the Joseph story what Russia and Georgia need to see, what Palestine and Israel need to embrace, what tribes and clans and families bent on war need to heed. Reconciliation takes the higher moral ground.

I remember reading Moby Dick for a second time about five years ago. I recall thinking that Herman Melville was telling me more about whales and harpoons than I needed to know.

But then it dawned on me that Melville wasn't really writing about whaling; he was writing about the futility of revenge. Captain Ahab becomes a truly tragic figure when the totality of his energy is consumed by a desire for revenge against the whale who robbed him of his leg. The thirst for revenge takes Ahab down, but it also takes down everyone else on the Pequod.

When I place Joseph and Ahab side by side, I lean toward reconciling with those who have wounded me, with those I have wounded; reconciling with those who have intended me harm, with those I have harmed; reconciling with those who took advantage, of me, with those of whom I took advantage. Sometimes the heat of emotion pushes me toward revenge, but wisdom shoves me toward reconciling.

The Joseph story is probably the longest story in the Bible. It covers fourteen chapters in the Book of Genesis! Though bigger isn't always better, the longer Biblical narratives are often the ones we need to pay the most attention to. If we read just one of the chapters, just part of the Joseph story, we're left wondering where God is in all of this. Where was God when they tossed Joseph into the pit? Where was God when they sold him into slavery? Where was God during seven years of drought? God seems to be asleep or on a vacation on some remote island when we read only one portion of the narrative. But read the whole story and we see that God is not only present in the drama; God is the director and the choreographer and the producer. God oversees the casting, and the lighting and the props! Taken as a whole, the story reveals God as one whose sleeves are rolled up, toiling night and day toward the goal of empowering siblings to reconcile; empowering parents to reconcile with children; empowering neighbors to reconcile with neighbors, even empowering nations to reconcile with nations. The story reveals a reconciling God!

I offer this sermon this morning to Russia and Georgia, to Robert Mugabe and to Morgan Tsvangirai, to Arab and non-Arab Sudanese, to anyone anywhere who seeks empowerment for the hard work of reconciliation. The God we worship is the source of the empowerment we seek. So, let us pray to our God as we have never prayed before. In the greatest of hope, Amen!