

Sermon 9-13-26
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Based on the First Lesson for the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, Genesis 50:15-21 and the Gospel, Matthew 18:21-35.

Favoritism, Forgiveness and Faith

The life of the Old Testament saint, Joseph, the son of Jacob is most amazing. The narrative of his life is found in Genesis chapters 37 – 50. Joseph was the favorite son of his father, the patriarch Jacob. Jacob was not shy about showing his favoritism to Joseph. You may have heard of the multi-colored coat Jacob gave Joseph as a sign of his favoritism. We think nothing of colored clothing now. But in Joseph's time it was very expensive. And so ten of Joseph's eleven brothers – all the ones older than him – hated him. Also, Joseph was favored more than the other sons of Jacob by God. And God wasn't shy about His favoritism either. He gave Joseph a marvelous dream in which all his brothers – even his mother and father – bowed down to him. Joseph wasn't shy about letting this dream be known. So, Joseph's older brothers hated him all the more.

There finally came a day and an occasion where Joseph's ten older brothers had him to themselves in a place far away from home. Some of them conspired together to kill him. Instead of killing Joseph, they put him down a well to die. One tried to save him. But while that brother was gone a caravan bound for Egypt came along. Some of the brothers had the bright idea to sell Joseph to these traders as a slave. This way they wouldn't have his blood on their hands and could make a little profit out of the deal. They, then, lied to their father, Jacob, that a wild animal had killed Joseph. As proof they produced Joseph's unmistakable coat. It looked like it had been worn by the victim of a wild animal attack. But the brothers themselves had mashed it in the dirt, torn it and poured sheep blood on it. It was the perfect cover up. Therefore, poor Jacob thought for sure that his beloved son, Joseph, was dead.

So, at seventeen, Joseph became a slave in Egypt. But God favored him in everything he did. Joseph was an earnest worker, very responsible and very honest. Even at seventeen – above all else – he feared God. That was the source of his ability. Therefore, in a few short years, the man who owned him – an Egyptian official by the name of Potiphar – recognized Joseph's abilities and gradually put Joseph in charge of everything he had.

Notice Joseph's story so far. He went from being the favorite of his father to being a lowly slave in a foreign land. Then he became the favorite of his owner and was put in charge of everything.

For a while everything went well for Joseph, but Joseph had a severe "handicap." Not only was he talented, Genesis 39:6, tells us, "... Now Joseph was handsome in form and appearance." How was this a handicap, you ask? Here's what Genesis 39:7 says, "7 and after a time his master's wife cast her eyes on Joseph and said, 'Lie with me!'" Tell me something. How do you say no to your boss's wife, especially when you're a slave? Is there any good way to do this? No. The devil had Joseph trapped.

Despite the trap, Joseph maintained his integrity. We're told in Genesis 39:8-10, "8 But he [Joseph] refused and said to his master's wife, 'Behold, because of me my master has no concern about anything in the house, and he has put everything that he has in my charge. 9 He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me except you, because you are his wife. How then can I do this great wickedness and sin against God?' 10 And as she spoke to Joseph day after day, he would not listen to her, to lie beside her or to be with her." Amazing! Under the most severe duress, Joseph kept his integrity. He's an incredible example of dedication and self-control for every young male. There was only one problem, however. As Shakespeare once put it, "hell hath no fury like a woman spurned."

One day, the wife caught Joseph all alone in the house. She grabbed him by his coat. Notice he seems to have a problem with coats. And she wouldn't let go, dragging him toward her bedroom. Joseph wriggled out of his coat and ran out of the house. The devil then hardened the heart of this miserable woman, turning her emotions from lust to outraged rejection and then to vengeance. She concocted a story that Joseph had tried to rape her, she had screamed, and he had run away leaving his coat. Her husband was so outraged that he had Joseph imprisoned. You can just see the satisfied smirk on her face as Joseph was chastised and led away. The uppity slave. Who does he think he is? He must think he's better than me. I'll show him. So Joseph's saga continued: from his father's favorite son to lowly slave; from his master's trusted manager to lowly prisoner – the victim of what we would call today sexual harassment. But Joseph didn't quit or give up. In prison he went right to work. In time he became the manager of the prison — from lowly prisoner to second in charge in the prison.

Joseph was a man of unusual God-given abilities. One of them was the ability to interpret God given dreams. In prison he did so for two of Pharaoh's personal officials who were in prison because they had angered Pharaoh. One of the two was hanged. The other returned to Pharaoh's court, just as the dreams had predicted. Joseph hoped that the man who returned to court would remember him. But Joseph languished in prison for two more years.

Finally Pharaoh himself had a series of very puzzling dreams from God that no one could interpret. The official remembered Joseph. Joseph interpreted the dreams. Egypt would be blessed with seven years of extremely abundant harvests. Plenty would abound. But, then it would be destroyed by seven years of bad harvests, famine and death. What to do? Joseph came up with a wise plan. Build great storehouses. Confiscate one fifth of every harvest during the seven good years and put it in storage for the bad years. Then use the stored grain to enable Egypt to survive the bad years. So, we read in Genesis 41:37-40, "37 This proposal pleased Pharaoh and all his servants. 38 And Pharaoh said to his servants, 'Can we find a man like this, in whom is the Spirit of God?' 39 Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, 'Since God has shown you all this, there is none so discerning and wise as you are. 40 You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command. Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you.'" Therefore, at thirty years of age, Pharaoh, the King of Egypt put Joseph in charge of all of Egypt. Just like that, Joseph was on top of the world again — this time until his death eighty years later.

Now, about 8 or 9 years later, during the famine that Joseph had correctly foretold to Pharaoh, Joseph's brothers came down to Egypt to buy grain for their families because of the famine. To do so, they had to appear before Joseph, the prince of Egypt. They didn't recognize the teenager they had once sold as a slave. Amazingly, just as Joseph's dream had

predicted, his brothers had to bow down to him. As the second highest ruler in all Egypt Joseph had them in his power. He could bring revenge down on their heads. But he didn't. At this point, the narrative gets very involved. We can shorten it by saying that instead of exacting vengeance on them, Joseph brought his Father's entire household down to Egypt and gave them a good life there. This included all his brothers and their families.

Year's later, however, when Jacob died, Joseph's brothers were terrified. They thought to themselves that Joseph had been holding off his revenge until his father died. So, they went to Joseph to beg mercy of him. The narrative is this morning's first lesson. In it we find Joseph's remarkable reply to them in Genesis 50:19-21, "19 But Joseph said to them [his brothers], 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? 20 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. 21 So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.' Thus he comforted them and spoke kindly to them."

We could teach for weeks and months on the life of this remarkable saint of God. But this morning I'm going to share with you seven observations. The first comes from the testimony the Jewish Christian, St. Stephen, gave at his trial before the Sanhedrin in Acts 7. Stephen compared Jesus to two important figures in Jewish history, Joseph, son of Jacob, and Moses. Both these men had been rejected by Israel. But God made them rulers over Israel. Indeed, Joseph's brothers had sold him as a slave, but then had to bow before him in fear. In the same way, the Sanhedrin, the Jewish leadership, rejected Jesus. But Stephen proclaimed that nevertheless Yahweh had made Jesus Lord over them. In raging anger the Sanhedrin martyred Stephen for such words. But they were true words. This is why Joseph is called a type of Christ — an Old Testament figure who foreshadows something about Jesus.

Second, is exercising authority. In the second lesson that appeared two weeks ago, Romans 13, we learned that God Himself has established every earthly authority and that the people who occupy offices of authority are God's agents tasked with suppressing evil and promoting virtue. For this reason we are to pay taxes and honor those who govern.

However, because we are sinners, there is always great danger. For, anyone put in a God ordained position of authority can easily be overcome by the urge to play God, engage in tyranny and get revenge on opponents. This is especially harmful in the church. And, this is why Jesus said to the apostles in Matthew 20:25-26, "25 . . . 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant.'" An authority figure is a servant. That's Yahweh's way of doing things. For Jesus Himself came as a servant.

Third is Joseph's profound rhetorical question: "Am I in the place of God?" The answer to that is yes and no and yes. Yes, because all earthly authority comes from God. And human authorities are commissioned by God to justly keep the peace — even using punishment and capital punishment to do so. As the second ruler in Egypt, Joseph was in the place of God. It was necessary for him to administer justice.

However - No - because none of us can see what God sees. As it says in 1 Samuel 16:7, "... man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart." Therefore, along with Joseph, every human in authority must confess that Yahweh alone is the ultimate judge of all things. Only Yahweh can render final judgments of innocence and guilt. For, Yahweh is the source of all righteousness and justice. He is no capricious tyrant. Rather,

Yahweh's judgments are made in the perfect holiness, righteousness, justice and integrity consistent with His divine nature and character.

Therefore, under the eyes of righteous Yahweh, Joseph could be no tyrant. He could not exact revenge upon his brothers. He recognized that any final judgment against his brothers belonged to Yahweh alone. For Yahweh alone would know if they had truly repented of their sins against Joseph. As for Joseph, he had seen enough repentance in them to be satisfied.

There was one other reason Joseph refrained from vengeance against his brothers — family. And his was no ordinary family. It was the family of Abraham, the family of Israel, the family of God — God's chosen people. Who was he to destroy the Lord's chosen people?

And this brings us to the final yes. All who are called to authority are called to lay down their own rebellion before the Lord so that they might be in the place of the holy and righteous God, ruling in all humility and using God's Word to judge between righteousness and evil. Those called to exercise Yahweh's authority in Yahweh's stead may not do so as little tyrants. Otherwise, they themselves will be under Yahweh's judgment for insubordination and unrighteousness.

And there's one venue we must address before we leave the question "am I in the place of God", and that's the family. We read in Ephesians 6:1-4, "1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 'Honor your father and mother' (this is the first commandment with a promise), 3 'that it may go well with you and that you may live long in the land.' 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord."

Parents exercise Yahweh's authority in the place of Yahweh. Indeed, the family is the place every human encounters authority for the first time. That authority must be just and consistent. It must build character and self-control into the wildly narcissistic and anarchistic little beings we come into the world as. Here parents must be careful to avoid tyranny. For tyranny provokes anger like nothing else. Instead, parents who live in the Word of God are to raise children in the power of that Word.

And as long as we're talking about character, let's move on to a fourth observation — Joseph's perspective concerning all the evil things that befell him in life. Somehow Joseph could say this to his brothers in Genesis 50:20, "... 'You meant evil against me, but God meant it for good. ...'" The good was that Joseph could keep his family — God's family — from perishing in the hideous seven-year famine.

It says in Romans 8:28, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose." (NIV) Only those who have been given grace from God to see things from God's perspective can affirm the truth of this verse. Of course, Joseph didn't know this New Testament verse, but Joseph is an example of it. Revenge was the furthest thing from Joseph's heart because Joseph was given God's perspective. And Joseph believed God.

It occurs to me that Joseph could have even said to Potiphar's wife, "you meant it for evil, but my God meant it for good." I wonder if she feared and trembled when she saw that Joseph had become the prince of Egypt — her ruler? She should have. But, Scripture doesn't tell us. Still, there is no mention of Joseph exacting revenge on her, even though she deserved it. In all this Joseph was granted God's perspective. He acted accordingly. Therefore, in all the bitter things we face in life, we likewise should pray that we might have God's perspective.

And this brings us to a fifth observation — forgiveness. If you pray the Lord's prayer, you say these words: "and forgive us our trespasses (sins) as we forgive those who trespass (sin) against us. Today's Gospel lesson is the parable of the unforgiving servant. Maybe twenty years ago I calculated that the servant owed his master about 50 million dollars. The second servant owed the unforgiving servant about ten thousand. With inflation, it's much more today. However, the point is that the man who had been forgiven 50 million could not in turn forgive ten thousand.

Forgiveness of your sins is the most important encounter you will ever have with the living God. God, the Son, gave His life on the cross for your forgiveness and mine. That's how important it is. That's how costly forgiveness is. But as costly to God as forgiveness is, it is His power to us. For where sin is forgiven, sin no longer exists. And where Yahweh has wiped out sin, only righteousness remains — a righteousness fit for eternal life with righteous, holy Yahweh. Therefore, without forgiveness of sins no one can be received into the Kingdom of God, the family of God. That's how costly and powerful forgiveness is. Therefore, what the parable of the unforgiving servant exposes is that if Yahweh is willing to forgive our fifty million in sin, we have to be willing to forgive the ten thousand in sin that the people we know may owe us.

Forgiveness is not that difficult, even if you have been extremely hurt. All you have to do is renounce any right you may have to exact justice from the person who has wronged you, and instead totally let Yahweh handle the matter. Put it completely in His hands. Indeed, without ever hearing Jesus' parable, that's what Joseph, son of Jacob, did.

Scripture does not command us to make friends with dangerous people who injure. We're permitted to stay as far away from such people as we want. However, if we insist on exacting private justice from such people for personal injury, we put ourselves in danger. For we're playing God. So, consider! Hasn't the real God forgiven our fifty million? Act accordingly.

One more thing. If wrong has been done, it's not wrong to seek justice from the authorities God has put in place to administer justice. But, that's not the justice Jesus' parable speaks of. It speaks of the resentments, vendettas and vengeance we privately hold in our hearts against those who have injured us. These are the desires we need to renounce so that we may place justice entirely in the hands of the God who truly sees everyone's heart.

Sixth, If Joseph had not been trained and disciplined by the roller coaster disappointments and humiliations he had endured in his young life, then he might not have been fit to exercise the authority that God gave him in Egypt. He might not have been fit to rule justly as God's agent. He might have been just another narcissistic, anarchistic punk tyrant holding revenge dear to his heart. But, God took a raw seventeen year old kid, sitting on top of the world as his father's favorite, and turned him into a mature, tested man of God — a man able to wield great power and authority in a trustworthy and godly manner, a man able to protect his family when the time came. May God's training gain His glory in us also.

Finally in those rollercoaster early years God strengthened the faith He had planted in Joseph's heart. It's easy to believe when everything is going well — when you're sitting on top of the world as your father's favorite, or your master's trusted servant and even as Pharaoh's second in command. But, what happens to your faith when your enemies gloat over you saying, "where is your God now, dream boy?" "Where is your God now, slave – you

who thought yourself too high and moral to come to my bed?” And where is your faith when old resentments and fears turn up in the form of long lost brothers?

Joseph is considered an Old Testament saint for a good reason. When God hid from him in dramatic fashion, when God became nothing in the face of the fantastic troubles that were confronting him, Joseph clung to no other God than the God who truly is – even if that would have meant dying in prison or dying a lowly slave. By the grace of God, Joseph didn’t despair when he was repaid with evil for doing good. He didn’t turn his back on God, or turn to evil in cynical despair. Yahweh gave Joseph the faith not to fall away. In all the trials Joseph endured, he considered God faithful and clung to the promises he had received from God. This is faith at work. And from such faith Joseph exercised remarkable strength, integrity and character in life.

When God seems to disappear from our view on this earth and all things are against us, we also are confronted with the test of faith. Real faith in God’s promises is forged in such fires. Faith in God’s Word, given by God Himself, emerges from this kind of acid bath.

Blessed, then, are those who in the face of trouble do not forsake the faith God has planted in their hearts. Blessed are those who mourn and grieve in trouble, but will not turn their hearts away from their Lord and Master, Jesus Christ. Blessed are those who allow themselves to be comforted by the Holy Spirit and by the Word of God in the midst of great disappointment. Like Joseph, they too will see God’s ultimate victory. Like Joseph they may even see miraculous rescue or marvelous blessings here on earth. But even if they do not, Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:6 still apply, “Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” (NIV) Amen.

All Bible quotes are from the ESV unless otherwise noted.