



## **“Family Reunions”**

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Genesis 45:1–15 (NRSV)***

Ah, summertime, and the living is easy. Warm sun. Cool breezes. Picnics in the park. A walk on the beach. Fireworks. Fresh produce from the garden. School vacations. And family reunions. Summertime, and the living is easy. Right?

It depends on whom you ask. Some people live for summer and all of the American traditions associated with it, including family reunions. Some don't.

My mother lives for family reunions. She looks forward to them more than birthdays or Christmas—except, that is, if she “gets stuck” being the host. My mother loves family reunions because she enjoys the home cooked recipes that can only be gotten at occasions like these when ethnic delicacies are cooked from scratch by those who don't need recipes. She also loves family reunions because she is the family genealogist, and sees them as “one-stops” for gathering precious information about the old-timers and the newest offspring.

We've all heard of people who are famous for closing bars. My mother is famous for closing family reunions.

As I've gotten older, I have learned how much work is required to host a family reunion. These jobs are not for the faint of heart. There are mailing lists to develop and maintain, invitations to create and distribute, park reservations to secure and pay for, and food and games to coordinate—all for an army of people who don't necessarily RSVP, and who aren't necessarily grateful when you follow up with them.

Ignorance is bliss. As a child, I loved family reunions almost as much as my mother does now. What's not to like? Musty shelter houses aside, the family reunions of my childhood were held at the nicest county parks, and they provided rare opportunities for my sister and me to play with gobs of cousins for hours on end.

We played on all the playground equipment, from the moment that we arrived until the time our parents called us in and we left to go home and do chores. We kids only stopped our play for the main meal. Occasionally, entertainment was provided for

the adults, but usually the adults just sat around and visited while we kids played to our hearts content.

I discovered in adolescence and early adulthood that some people dreaded family reunions and intentionally didn't RSVP or attend. In fact, I realized that for some, the thought of reuniting with family seemed like a fate worse than death.

If you're one in that number whose family issues run so deep that you cringe at the thought of attending a reunion, then you may have a unique insight for understanding today's Old Testament Reading from Genesis 45.

## II

The events leading up to the scene in Genesis 45, which Susan just read for us, set up a context for today's Old Testament reading that portend the family reunion from hell. I'll summarize the events leading up to today's text to underscore this point.

Joseph is the protagonist in today's story. He is one of the patriarchs of Ancient Israel. Joseph was the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, and the first son of Jacob's wife, Rachel. Jacob's oldest brother was Reuben, and his youngest brother was Benjamin. Benjamin is the only brother who is named in today's story.

As you may recall from Brenda's sermon last Sunday, or from your childhood days in Sunday School, Joseph was presumed by his older brothers to be his father's favorite son, and the one destined to receive the birthright that by tradition was owed to his eldest brother, Reuben.

As the story goes, fatherly favoritism begat sibling jealousies which led to—among other things—Joseph's elder brothers throwing him into a cistern and selling him to Ishmaelite traders for a bag of silver. The elder brothers returned home to their father, Jacob, carrying Joseph's coat, which they soiled with goat's blood in order to support their tale about how Joseph had been devoured by wolves while they were out tending their father's sheep.

Meanwhile, back in Egypt, when the Ishmaelite traders arrived in Pharaoh's court, they sold Joseph to Pharaoh, who raised him to be a leader in Egypt.

Joseph was smart and successful and rose to the highest rank in Pharaoh's court. Pharaoh rewarded him with power, a splendid home, and a wife named Asenath, who was the daughter of a temple priest.

When Joseph's brothers fled to Egypt during the second year of a seven-year famine, Pharaoh offered Joseph's brothers respite and food to take back to Hebron (a region located in the southern part of modern Israel), an invitation to settle in the land of Goshen (an eastern province of Egypt).

Ultimately, the sons of Jacob went back to Hebron, as Joseph directed them, and gathered up their parents and their wives and children, and brought the whole entourage back to Egypt, where they took sanctuary from the famine.

Today's scripture reading describes Jacob's sons' first reunion since his brothers had sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites and the two groups had parted company.

When I say that the meeting of Joseph and his brothers in Egypt was destined to be "the family reunion from hell," I mean that Joseph had every reason to turn his brothers away, in spite of their need, or to do to them what they had done to him. Joseph had every reason to avenge himself for his brothers' having thrown him into the cistern and sold him into slavery.

Human reason and Ancient Hebrew law allowed "an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth," but Joseph chose a different option than revenge. Instead of anger, Joseph was so relieved at seeing his brothers again that Joseph wept.

Israel's ancient genealogists were not particularly concerned with the interior life of the patriarchs, so we never read a description about the emotions or thoughts that led to Joseph's weeping. We only learn that instead of walloping his brothers, Joseph wept over his brothers, and he gave them what they needed rather than what they deserved.

So we don't exactly know how Joseph felt or thought about all that had happened to him at the hands of his brothers. All we know is how he responded to these circumstances. All we know is that Joseph wept, he hugged his brothers, he gave them food and shelter, and he sent them home to fetch their father and extended family and bring everyone back to Egypt, to the province of Goshen where their lives were spared.

According to the narrator in Genesis, the elder sons of Jacob did not recognize Joseph at first; but Joseph recognized them, and explained that he was the one whom they had sold into slavery. The brothers were dumbstruck by Joseph's pronouncement. They were speechless. They could not even form words to make an apology.

So Joseph spoke through his tears, and echoed words that reverberate through the eons. He explained to his brothers that God used their jealousies and hatred for a higher and better purpose—to ultimately preserve their lives and the Hebrew people in a time of famine. Joseph explained further that unless he had been sold to the Ishmaelites, and sold again to Pharaoh, his brothers—and their entire nation—would have perished.

### III

The issues that we encounter in the lives of Ancient Israel's first families are formidable. Often times I find that this realization surprises people in the pews, because somehow so many of us grow up with the impression that people in the Bible or

people in churches have had perfect families, and that they/we ought to keep our family problems to ourselves in order to fit in, especially in church.

Ironically, the opposite couldn't be truer. As my friend and a former "first-lady" of Eden Church (Eleanor Norberg) is fond of saying, "You couldn't make this stuff up." You couldn't make up the events that happened to our first families in the faith. Their lives were as colorful and complicated—maybe even more so—than ours.

What's remarkable about the lives of our patriarchs and matriarchs in the faith, isn't that they were perfect, but rather how at least some navigated their family problems, and were able, at least sometimes, to resolve their differences in a manner that brought a healthier resolution to their conflicts and that glory to God.

Consider for a moment the question, "What can we learn from Joseph?" In particular, "What can we learn from this family reunion in Genesis 45?"

I don't know how you would answer these questions, but I will venture a few of responses of my own while you're pondering yours.

One lesson that we can learn from Joseph is the importance of looking at "the big picture," rather than dwelling on some small aspect of the grand scheme. In the big picture of things, for example, Joseph realized that his family was starving and that his father was still alive, and that while he had a million legitimate reasons to hold a grudge against his brothers, and to get revenge on them, he did not respond to his brothers in anger. Joseph did not sock-it-to-them with what they deserve. Instead, he gave his brothers and their families what they needed. He was gracious.

Joseph's decision may have been in part a practical decision, because responding in anger would have only deepened the divide between him and his brothers, and prolonged and perhaps prohibited a reunion with his father.

Regardless of the reasons, which we will never know, Joseph looked at the big picture, and acted out of a knowledge of a big-picture reality, and as a consequence, Joseph was able to experience some of the healing that he needed—particularly through a reunification with his brother, Benjamin, and his father, Jacob.

A second lesson that we can learn from Joseph is to focus on the future rather than dwell on the past. In particular, we can learn from Joseph how to focus on the kind of future that God envisions for us and our families, rather than the past which we cannot change. Focusing on the future does not mean that we can or should forget the past. It does not mean that we forgive our brothers (and sisters), when they have not asked for forgiveness, or demonstrated any change in behavior. Instead, focusing on the future means keeping our eyes on the prize of the upward call of Christ, as Paul put it, in Philippians 3:4. Focusing on the future, on the prize, on the upward call of Christ, reminds us that we have not been called to a life of revenge, but rather to a life that strives for repentance and reconciliation.

Focusing on the big picture rather than the small picture, and focusing on the future rather than the past, means that Joseph—and ultimately all of us—can participate in creating a new reality—a new outcome—rather than repeating the past, by recycling old jealousies and continuing the cycle of betrayal and injury that may be common in our families of origin.

I am reminded by Joseph's story of a declaration that my mother often made to my sister and me when we tried to convince her that the other one of us was at fault in a fight. We would explain, "Well, she started it, Mom." To which our mother would say in response, "I don't care who started this fight. I only want to know who's going to end it." What we learn in Genesis 45 is that Joseph chose to finish the fight that his brothers seem to have started.

No matter what our family issues may be today, there are likely times in each of our lives when we have a choice about whether we perpetuate an unhealthy family dynamic, or we put it to rest. Maybe that time is now. Joseph's example invites us to do our part in putting to rest dysfunctional and destructive patterns of family behavior that simply need to stop. We can be the ones to do it. We can be the ones to stop the fight and to create a platform for confession, contrition, forgiveness, and absolution.

These are some of the lessons that we can learn from the story of Joseph: we can learn to look at the big picture; we can learn to focus on the future rather than the past; and we can stop participating in unhealthy family dynamics. There are likely other lessons that we could learn, too. But these are a good start. These are some lessons that can foster healthy family reunions.

My prayer for each of us and for our families is that we can take these lessons to heart and implement them, so that the hope that was fulfilled through Joseph's family might continue to be fulfilled through our own families. Amen.