

Just Peace Sunday

Sept. 17, 2017

Sermon Seed

Text: Genesis 50:15-21

Theme: Remembering, Repenting, and Renewing

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Basic Outline:

1. Joseph overcomes his brothers by obtaining power over them
2. Joseph's brothers realize their father has died stirring concerns about possible enmity
 - a. Joseph's brothers approach him to ask forgiveness on behalf of their mutual father
 - i. Brothers imply that they were wrong to do what they did to Joseph
 - ii. Brothers ask for forgiveness
3. Joseph weeps
4. Brothers weep
 - a. Brothers either offer themselves as slaves or acknowledge their vulnerability
5. Joseph reassures them
 - a. Am I in place of God?
 - i. God preserved the people
 - b. I will provide for you and your children
6. Joseph lives a long life in peace seeing his children's children to the third generation
 - a. Israel mourns Joseph's passing and respects his wish to leave when they do

Narrative Context:

The book of Genesis begins by broadly covering the history of the world and focuses in on the individual Abraham before expanding to Abraham's children and their families. On one occasion God speaks to Abraham telling him that his children would be slaves for four hundred years before God brings them out. In Joseph's story, famine, the injustice of Jacob favoring Joseph, Joseph lording his favored position over his brothers, and Jacob's eleven son's jealousy put the whole family in the land of future slavery. Although Genesis ends with the death of Jacob and Joseph and the reminder of slavery to come, it also ends on a hopeful note. First comes the re-uniting of Joseph with his father after his brothers demonstrate empathy and compassion toward Jacob and Benjamin by offering themselves in Benjamin's place in prison for the sake of their father. Then comes the healing of Joseph and his brother's relationships when the brothers choose the path of humility over violence and Joseph chooses the path of grace over revenge. Finally, Joseph assures his brothers that God will bring them out of Egypt by asking that his bones be brought out with them. Christians will later draw parallels between the exodus from Egypt and the death and resurrection of Jesus bringing all humanity out of bondage to sin, which looks toward the total redemption of the world.

Conflicts at Play:

It is important to note the conflicts at play, which are many and complex. There is conflict between God's promise to make of Abraham a great nation and the potential splitting of Abraham's children if they cannot set things right. There is conflict between the hope of future freedom and the promise of future slavery. There is conflict between the brothers who know that Joseph is loved more. There is conflict between brothers as Joseph has experienced being sold into slavery. There is conflict between Israel and the Egyptians as different cultures collide. There is a conflict of power reversal as Joseph has to take up a new role with authority over Egypt and his brothers. There is conflict of the unknown as Joseph's brothers could not know what Joseph would do when their father died and could no longer be grieved by family infighting. There is conflict of the unknown for Joseph as well because he could not really know how genuine his brothers are especially in the time of their father's death. These conflicts seemed to be at a stand-still while Jacob lived, but when Jacob died the level of vulnerability in the family was too high and could no longer be avoided.

The Way of Just Peace for Jacob's Family:

Jacob's family escaped the dangers of famine, but found themselves still embroiled in a human made conflict. The pain of being sold as property into slavery and of your beloved father being deceived into believing that you are dead for years is not a pain that can simply be ignored. Although Joseph tested his brothers to see that they had changed and although Joseph himself presumably planned to do no harm to his brothers, the conflict still boiled under the surface and threatened to tear the family apart. Despite not being explicitly mentioned in this text, resolving this conflict and reuniting the family required a process called *Teshuvah* which involves remembering, repenting, and renewing. Although people often think that it is enough to apologize and stop doing the wrong that created pain in the first place, the story of Jacob's family demonstrates for us that sometimes a mere apology is not enough to create a Just Peace and that *Teshuvah* is a necessary step on the way to *Shalom*.

Teshuvah is a word in Hebrew which has literal, relational, and theological meanings, all of which have relevance for understanding the resolution of conflict in our story. The literal meaning of *Teshuvah* is to return. For example, in Genesis 16:9 God tells Hagar to "return" or *shuv* to her mistress. In this instance, Hagar had travelled physical distance from Sarah, and God was calling her to travel that physical distance back to Sarah. Later in the Bible, *shuv* began to be applied to relationships, this is what I call the "relational" sense. In Deuteronomy 30:2, God says "and return (*shuv*) to the Lord your God and you and your children obey him with all your heart and with all your soul..." (NRSV) In this instance, the distance between Israel and God is not physical but relational. If Israel goes away from God in heart and soul the *shuv* or return will be a matter of a changing heart. The theological sense of *teshuvah* combines the action of returning and the choice of changing one's heart, with the resulting belief that *shalom* (peace/wholeness) can only be achieved when not only an attempt has been made to repair the damage done when one wrongs God or another person, but when one commits to actions that have the opposite effect of the harm done. In the story of Joseph and in our lives we must do *teshuvah* to resolve conflicts if there really is to be a just-peace.

By the time the events of Genesis 50:15-21 happened Joseph and his brothers seem to have taken all the steps people normally associate with repentance, but fear and distrust still ravaged Joseph and his brother's relationship. In Genesis 45, Joseph not only refuses to take revenge on his brothers but he tells them not to worry or even stress themselves about what they have done. In Genesis 45, Joseph weeps with his brothers and kisses them giving them many assurances that things are ok. For many people these proclamations and signs of forgiveness are the essences of repentance and reconciliation, but in this story it was not enough to create a just or whole peace. Joseph's brothers found themselves still haunted by the memory of what they had done and Joseph's power over them combined with everyone's love of their father made transparent declarations of repentance and forgiveness near impossible. The fact that *shalom* had not been achieved became clear when their father died and all the brother's anxiety came to surface as they feared for their lives. The death of their father created a level of vulnerability necessitating a process of *teshuvah*.

The first step in the process of *teshuvah* is remembering. Joseph's brothers remembered what they did by selling Joseph into slavery. The brother's remembered that this action was driven by evil intent and could never be taken back. Joseph remembered what his brothers had done and remembered everything that happened as a result of what they did. The second step is repentance. Joseph's brothers showed some form of repentance when they offered to take the place of Benjamin in jail. Joseph's brothers also participated in an early process of reconciliation by receiving Joseph's gifts and hearing Joseph's reasons to be comforted. This recognition of remembering and repentance brought the family to a tension filled ceasefire. The brothers could live with Joseph and Joseph could live with his brothers, but there was not a connection of brotherly love between them. To forge the connection of brotherly love Joseph and his brothers had to undergo the third step which is the process of renewing. This step was sparked by the death of their father and concern on the part of the brothers for what might happen to them. In the case of Joseph and his brothers the process of renewing was more than going to back to a time of trust before the brothers sold Joseph into slavery, it was recognizing all that had happened and choosing a path in the reverse direction of the strife they chose before. Joseph chose to abandon lording his position over his brothers and worked at seeing to the welfare of their children. Joseph's brothers chose to set aside their jealousy and work with Joseph toward a peaceful community. In the end, this created a united nation of Israel where no tribe had power over the other and it created prosperity amongst them.

The way of *teshuvah* utilized by Joseph's family must be the way of Just Peace for our families, churches, and communities today. The purpose of remembering is not only to celebrate some of the past and prevent other parts from repeating, but to discover what grievances have been ignored or suppressed. Once grievances are recognized, repentance must be vocalized or expressed in some clear way. After the intent to never return to the damaging behavior has been vocalized, we learn from the story of Joseph that it is necessary to renew the relationship by going in a direction that is the reverse of what created the damage in the first place. It is not enough simply to create barriers preventing the harmful behavior from happening again, but by actively pursuing a reverse course one instills habits that also reassure the hurt party that a true change of heart has happened. For Joseph and his brothers that meant Joseph's brothers being willing to share their vulnerability and Joseph being willing to care for their families. In a congregational setting it may mean any number of things, but this just peace Sunday let us do *teshuvah* learning to remember, to repent, and to renew our relationships with God and one another.