



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
August 16, 2020

“Yours, Mine and Ours”
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block
Genesis 45:1-15

Genesis 45:1-15

45:1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers.

45:2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it.

45:3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

45:4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

45:5 And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.

45:6 For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest.

45:7 God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.

45:8 So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

45:9 Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.

45:10 You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.

45:11 I will provide for you there--since there are five more years of famine to come--so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.

45:12 And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you.

45:13 You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here."

45:14 Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck.

45:15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

~

When did we forget that we belong to each other?

I don't know if you saw the video from about a month ago that went viral. It was of an elderly white woman standing in line at Costco with her mask hanging down from one ear.

As she waited an employee got close to her and asked, "Ma'am, could you please put on your mask?"

"I am a member here!" She snapped back. "I don't need to wear a mask." The employee responded,

"I am sorry, it's policy here now. You cannot shop without a mask." The woman became more agitated and blurted,

"I am an American. It's my right to not wear a mask."

A few moments later the employee asked her supervisor to talk to the woman. He approached her and said, now a bit more sternly, "Ma'am this is for everyone's safety. Mine and yours. If you don't put your mask on, you need to leave."

The woman became enraged. And those around her could not help but stare. "This is my freedom," she shouted. You can't tell me what to do. This is America!" The employee took a breath,

"Ma'am, if you refuse to do this, I am sorry – you are going to have to go."

This was just too much. The woman stepped out of line (*in more ways than one*) and began to have what I can only describe as an adult temper tantrum. She plopped her body on the floor - legs crossed and arms crossed – and announced, "I am not leaving." Then she huffed loudly, stared up at the ceiling, and sat silent.

There she was, a grown person claiming a piece of floor at Costco in "the name of freedom." Finally, as people shopped and exited the store around her, a third employee approached her - I imagine the manager this time - and insisted, still kindly, that she must leave.

Eventually, she got up and declared to all of the onlookers and “wholesale items” that she didn’t want to be a member of THIS place anymore. Then, she tore her mask from her ear, threw it on the ground and stormed out – having purchased nothing.

When did we forget that we belong to each other?

Difficult seasons don’t always bring out the best in us.

And this pandemic has surely taken its toll.

These past few months, we as a church family, a local and national family, a global family have had to navigate a whole new way of being: of being together, of being apart.

We have witnessed or participated in countless boxing matches:

between economic and human security,

between science and opinion,

between virtual and in-person gatherings,

between the oppressed and the powerful,

between community safety and individual freedom.

These boxing matches have complicated our human family.

We have become even more - distant.

Our language has centered around “Us and Them,” “Yours vs. Mine,” “scarcity” rather than “abundance.”

And we cannot seem to agree on a narrative OR way forward.

As Christians, we may be finding our faith in God taking a back seat to our own frustrations and fears. We may be noticing ourselves pushing one another away or looking for somewhere to place the blame. We may even be letting go of Christ’s hand and instead getting lost in feelings of total isolation or hopelessness.

In this unprecedented time, when we must hurry to function as one family, surely we are wondering if it will ever be possible to mend the brokenness between us and begin to heal our ailing world.

When did we forget that we belong to each other?

Complicated families are not new to us. We know that our own families are not free from challenge, and our Biblical families surely have had their fair share of disfunction.

A rabbi-mentor of mine once said that jealousy is the root of all evil. And to preface our story this morning, Joseph’s brothers’ “insane jealousy” was the reason for their wicked plot against him. Now, we know that Joseph was their father’s favorite child. He showered Joseph with words of praise and material gifts – including that famously controversial multicolored coat.

Watch Joseph video (clip 2:07-2:51): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snYP49EAIWg>

Joseph was indeed no ordinary child. He was blessed with the ability to interpret dreams and make predictions about the future. He even predicted that he would one day rise to power and greatness. His brothers' jealousy drove them to want to be rid of him. They considered killing their own brother and then eventually sold him into slavery, telling their father that his favorite son was dead.

As an Egyptian slave, Joseph went on to endure torture, sexual harassment, imprisonment, and more. His saving grace came when he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams – and in so doing predict the famine that would come, and help the country prepare for it.

Suddenly Joseph was in Pharaoh's inner circle, holding all of the power that he once had predicted he would. When his brothers came to Egypt in search of assistance to survive the famine – they did not recognize their brother, Joseph. He played some tricks on them for sure (*I mean the guy had been through a lot!*). He made them sweat and bow down to him, but here, this morning, we meet Joseph, now unable to play this part any longer. Joseph feels it's time to reveal his true identity to his kin, and turn over a new leaf.

"I am Joseph," he says through his tears. "Is my father still alive?"

As justice-hungry people, we love when the bad guys get their comeuppance, and we would all have understood (even cheered him on) if Joseph had pushed his brothers away, and forced them to suffer his same fate or worse. But Joseph doesn't give us "sweet revenge" today, but radical forgiveness – *unearned, undeserved and unsatisfying!*

For our fractured human family, forgiveness and harmony are not a top priority these days. We would rather take our anger to Twitter, we would rather sit in judgement, elevate our own suffering, instead of making room for the suffering of neighbors and strangers. It seems as if our physical distance has become an emotional one. The rhetoric on the news feels even more divisive, and the choices we are being forced to make about school and work feel less clear and fair.

In this dizzying, lonesome time, we may relate to Joseph's plight: having been taken away from the life that we knew, having endured so much these past few months, feeling disappointed in our human family's inability to be trustworthy and fiercely compassionate.

But we may not relate to the way Joseph chooses to respond: his reaction seems unnatural and transformational. Joseph should shout at his brothers, instead he weeps. Joseph should hold them accountable, instead he releases them from blame. Joseph should send them away, instead he says: "Come closer to me." *What are we to do with this?*

Joseph's actions seem far too theatrical to be humanly possible; they contradict every instinct. When we are feeling so angry and frustrated with our fellow Americans, with maybe even our own family members because of the situation we have built together (that seems muddier than ever), here we have Joseph: choosing relationship and reconciliation over payback and punishment; choosing grace over pointing fingers; choosing community-

good over self-preservation; demonstrating for us that family – even “complicated” family – is more sacred than anything else, and always worth fighting for.

When did we forget that we belong to each other?

Julio Diaz is not a famous person. He was just one of millions of train-riding workers commuting home that day. What happened to him that evening was later captured by StoryCorps, an organization that believes that every person has a story to share (and travels around the country recording them).

I shared Julio’s tale with our youth during our virtual Montreat conference a few weeks ago and I want to share his story with us now. His words speak about our “complicated family” – the ways unjust systems lead to desperation, and what can be possible when we let each other in.

Watch Julio StoryCorps video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oOpsfijIA> ⁱⁱ

In exchange for Julio’s money, the young man gave him his knife: that which had been separating him from the rest of the world. Free from it now, Julio was inviting this young man to live in a new way: in the way God intends for us to live – not as adversaries, but as family.

When did we forget that we belong to each other?

Perhaps the most controversial and critical moment of Joseph’s story is when he frees his brothers from fault. “And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here,” he says “for God sent me before you to preserve life.”

This piece of text can leave a sour taste in our mouths. *Did God cause Joseph’s suffering? Did God want him to experience all this torture?* This is of course one of the most debated questions of our faith, but one I invite us to consider closely today – perhaps in a new way.

“God sent me before you to preserve life,” Joseph says. In this moment, where so much damage has been done, where so much damage can still be done, Joseph’s faith disrupts the chaos and begins to mend the brokenness.

What seems to matter most here for us is not *if* God caused the pain and suffering, but rather *what* God has done with this pain and suffering. Joseph’s family – his brothers - sought to destroy his life, yet God charted a new way forward to preserve his life, and through him, the lives of many throughout Egypt.

God, through Joseph, is not interested in revenge here, God is interested in repairing fractured relationship. God is interested in charting a way forward, of leaving no one behind.

After Joseph extends this mercy to his brothers, after he embraces them,
Scripture says his brothers *talk with him*.
Maybe the words do not come easy at first, but soon they have much to discuss.
They are getting to know one another all over again,
and they are beginning to set the foundation for a new chapter as siblings once more.

And so too it is with us.
Where there is brokenness, God offers reconciliation,
where there is jealousy, God teaches profound acceptance.
Where there is division, God yearns to bring us back to one another,
and to the One who is *ours* – who hold us all close.
It is mysterious, merciful, life-saving work – that is never finished.

Siblings in Christ, instead of asking the question:
when did we forget that we belong to each other?
How would our thinking shift, if we dared to ask:
What would it look like to “come close” to each other?

This is a season of “complicated” family, of “pandemic wilderness,” of “yours vs. mine.”
It is easy to lose hope, to turn a blind eye, to place blame, to push each other away, to get
lost in despair.

But God reminds us that we are never called to the easy road.
We have been made for one another.
We have been made for God’s purpose.
We have been made to creatively forge connections across distances, differences,
disagreements in order to build and rebuild community – when no else dares.

We are called into family - imperfect, but steadfast.
May we be willing to extend radical mercy,
May we be eager to preserve life,
and may we be foolish, and fearless, and faithful enough to stop at nothing
to repair this fractured world together.

ⁱ “*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.” Music by: Andrew Lloyd Weber. 1999 film.
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=snYP49EAIWg> >

ⁱⁱ “Julio Diaz: He Was Robbed At Knifepoint and Gained a Friend” StoryCorps and UpWorthy.
< <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7oOpsfbiJlA> >