

“Forgiveness and Super Glue”

Genesis 45: 1-15

August 17, 2008

If you were here last week, or if you happened to watch it in streaming video on our website, Bill Aldrich preached a powerful sermon titled “*When Life Gives You Lemons...*” In that sermon Bill laid out for us in great detail the Old Testament story of Jacob’s son Joseph and his 10 brothers. As Bill clearly showed us, it is at its heart a story of broken relationships.

As Bill said last week, Joseph was his father’s favorite son, a reality that did not make him a fan favorite among his brothers. And to make matters worse, Joseph had crazy dreams that he told his brothers suggested to him that God thought that they should bow down to him in obedience. This was not a great way to make friends with and influence his brothers. This decided lack of positive public relations led Joseph’s brothers to throw him into a well and sell him into slavery. Once sold into slavery, Joseph was then accused of sexual misconduct and thrown into an Egyptian jail.

To put it mildly, Joseph was not having a lot of fun. And we can only imagine the sort of thoughts that must have been running through young Joseph’s mind about his 10 brothers as he lay at the bottom of that pit, felt the chains of the slave traders, and sat alone in that Egyptian jail. “*If I ever see them again ... if I can ever lay my hands on them, I’m going to make them pay for every day, every hour, and every minute that I have had to suffer.*” There can be no doubt that brokenness and pain defined Joseph’s relationship with his brothers.

But fortunately for all concerned, in addition to the abundant brokenness that marks their story, forgiveness is the word that ultimately characterizes the story of Joseph and his brothers. And the path that led to that forgiveness is every bit as astounding as the one that led Joseph into that Egyptian jail.

As Bill also told you last week, while Joseph waited in that jail, Pharaoh had some dreams of his own. They were crazy chaotic dreams of sick cows and cannibalistic corn stalks that Joseph was called to come and interpret. His interpretation of those dreams, and his plan to save a portion of the crops to sustain the people during the famine predicted in Pharaoh’s dreams, led to Joseph being made a governor with the responsibility of selling the wheat that he had ordered the farmers to store away.

Back home in Canaan, Joseph's father and brothers were suffering from the famine as well, and hearing that there was grain to be had in the land of Egypt, Jacob sent his sons to buy some wheat. This is where things get interesting.

When his brothers arrived in Egypt, Joseph recognized them immediately. And we are told in chapter 42 that he *"treated them like strangers and spoke roughly to them."* He accused them of being foreign spies and put them through the wringer. We can only imagine what sort of dastardly thoughts Joseph entertained along the way. *"Now I've got you right where I want you. Sell me into slavery will you? I'll show you the pain of an Egyptian whip and the desolation and filth of an Egyptian jail. You're all going to pay dearly for the suffering that I've had to endure."* Which one of us would not have been tempted think, or do the same?

Despite the temptation, however overwhelming it might have been, revenge was not the path of action that Joseph chose to take. Instead, Joseph chose to offer his brothers forgiveness. The scripture continues the story, *"Then Joseph could not control himself before all those who stood by him; and he cried, 'make every one go out from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept aloud so that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. And Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph; is my father still alive? Come near to me I pray you.'" And they came near. And he said "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."*

You can feel the emotion of this unbelievable reconciliation as brothers hug and kiss and speak important words previously unspoken. Yet as I read this story of forgiveness and reconciliation, I have to wonder if I were put in this situation, would I be able to do the same?

And so I look to Joseph's story for guidance. And as I do, I find two things that enabled him to offer such an unimaginably difficult and powerful gift to his brothers that day.

The first thing that ignites the power of forgiveness in Joseph's heart is a sense of personal responsibility. When Joseph told his brothers "*do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves because you sold me here*" one can't help but hear the voice of a man who has had a lot of time not only to think of what others have done, but also of what role he might have played in the drama as well. Joseph knew he was difficult. Joseph understood how hard it must have been for them to have a brother who is constantly being held up as daddy's favorite. And rather than try to make peace with his brothers, Joseph had worn his father's favoritism just like he wore that crazy coat of many colors, parading his privileged status around like some sort of clown. There was a part of Joseph that knew that that in some ways, he had asked for it when his brothers had tossed him into the bottom of that well. He still held his brothers responsible for their actions, but he also understood the role that he had played in the destruction of their relationship.

But even more importantly, Joseph also understood the role that God was playing as well. Perhaps the most important statement made by Joseph in the entire passage is what he said immediately after accepting his guilt. "*And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God.*"

Joseph understood his brothers' actions and Joseph accepted his personal guilt. But most important of all, Joseph understood that God was in charge. Any time that we suffer pain and misfortune in our lives, we search for God's presence and an understanding of God's will. And Joseph — more than about any other Biblical character that I can think of — understood that delicate balance between God's will and our free will, as well as the way in which God's good can always be found and achieved no matter how difficult and messy we might make things along the way.

Joseph understood that God didn't cause the famine, but he did offer Joseph the solution once it came along. Joseph knew that God didn't will the broken relationship that had erupted between him and his brothers, but also he understood that God had provided them the opportunity to come back together. And most unbelievably of all, he realized that none of it would

have been possible without the difficult times that he had been forced to endure.

As Paul tells us in Romans 8:28, “*All things work together for good for those who love God.*” And it was Joseph’s trust in God’s love coupled with the acceptance of his own sinful actions that allowed that good not only to heal the broken relationship that he had with his brothers, but also to feed the world as well.

God’s plan was peace, but peace had to come through pain with tears, tears of forgiveness that cemented those brothers together with a bond stronger than super glue. For you see, that’s what forgiveness and super glue have in common. They fix things. They take things that have been broken apart and bind them together with love and understanding. Forgiveness was the super glue that mended their broken relationship and changed every life involved forever. As the brothers heard Joseph’s words of forgiveness they felt God’s calm washing over them and for the first time in years they felt at peace with the world. All the pain, all the agonizing guilt that had held them in bondage for so many years was stripped away by Joseph’s healing words of forgiveness.

Where are the broken and damaged relationships in your life? Insults, sharp words, and revenge will never help the pain go away. But if you will listen to Joseph’s life, if you will work to understand others and accept your own guilt, if you will trust in God’s will and truly believe that God’s love is at work in your life and your world to bring all things together for good, you will find a peace of mind that only forgiveness can offer.
Amen.