



Plymouth Congregational Church
2001 E. Grand River Avenue
Lansing, MI 48912

August 14, 2011

FROM PLYMOUTH'S PULPIT

"Betrayal, Faith, and Reconciliation"

Margaret S. Wallin

I am a sucker for a good story. Given the choice between reality TV, game shows, even comedy, I will choose to view a good story. And this morning's Old Testament passage is part of a story that is more than just a good story. The story of Joseph has everything in it to make it a most compelling tale. It has love, jealousy, intrigue, lust, bad actors, heroes, and full-bodied characters that provide ethos and emotion. One would be hard pressed to find a continuous tale in the Bible that has more in the way of emotion, drama, as well as theological and practical insights that are important for us as "people of the Book." Let's just quickly recap for those of us who may not remember the salient details.

Joseph is one of 12 sons born to Jacob through his two wives and their two maids. Joseph is the first son born of Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel. The beginnings of trouble start more than 20 chapters before today's reading. Remember the story of how Jacob worked to satisfy Rachel's father so that he might marry her; the father-in-law-to-be tricked him into taking Rachel's older sister Leah; and after other tricks and demands and years more working for the father-in-law, Jacob finally won Rachel, the woman he loved. Leah, her maid, and Rachel's maid gave Jacob sons. But Joseph was the first of two sons from Rachel, and was the apple of Jacob's eye. He unabashedly favored him over the

other brothers, which caused not a little jealousy. And, in response to this favoritism, Joseph became odiously proud of his special place in Jacob's heart. He wore the coat of many colors proudly, and did not fail to bring up his special position with his brothers – all of which only increased the ill feelings his brothers had for him. In fact, one morning Joseph shares with his brothers a dream he has had that all of **them** will bow down to **him** 3 times. Can you imagine? He could have kept that to himself, and maybe the rest of the story would have been very different.

One day, the brothers are away tending the family sheep. Jacob sends Joseph out to find out how the brothers are doing with the flocks. Joseph finally catches up to his brothers, who are not happy to see him. They suspect his is a spy for the father and just waiting to snitch on them, as they believed he had in the past. They resent his presence there. In fact, one of them gets the idea that they should kill him, take the bloody coat back to the father and tell him that a wild animal got his favorite son. Another brother, perhaps to save his life, suggests digging a pit and placing Joseph in it to die (with the intent to come back and release him later), which they do. But then, a traveling caravan of Ishmaelites comes by, and at the suggestion of Judah, the brothers determine to make some money on this pain in the neck brother Joseph and sell him to this caravan, which then takes Joseph to Egypt for sale for profit.

In Egypt, Joseph is purchased as a slave by a high ranking official, Potiphar, whose wife tries to seduce Joseph. When he rejects her advances, she cries assault, and Joseph is taken to jail or prison. While in prison, Joseph's ability to interpret dreams helps another prisoner who had been Pharaoh's cup bearer. When that prisoner is released, Joseph asks him to remember Joseph's plight, put in a good word with Pharaoh, and see what can be done to free him.

Not until 2 years later when Pharaoh has difficulty with a disturbing dream does the former prisoner remember Joseph and his special talents for interpreting dreams. Joseph is brought forth and interprets Pharaoh's dream to say

that famine is coming and a portion of the yield of the fields should be saved for the coming times of shortage. This impresses the ruler. For his wisdom in interpreting the dream, Joseph is placed second only to Pharaoh over the lands and people of Egypt. He is to be the overseer of the food collection that will avert the future famine. Joseph is dressed in fine linens, given the Pharaoh's signet ring, and he is given an Egyptian name and a wife – the daughter of a priest.

Now as it happens, the famine spread across the Middle East and Jacob sends 10 sons to Egypt to buy grain, as they had heard that there was some available for sale. Who should they run into, but Joseph? It was inevitable as Joseph controlled the sale of the item they wanted. They do not recognize him (after all, they believed him to be gone or in lowly estate somewhere). He recognizes them, but withholds his identity, and accuses them of being spies, and insists that they must bring the youngest brother, Benjamin to Egypt to prove their integrity. He holds one of the 10 hostage and sends the others off with sacks of grain on their donkeys, with the money they used to buy the grain secreted in their sacks. The brothers are full of guilt and believe that God is punishing them for what they did to Joseph 11 or 12 years prior.

The free brothers go home to Jacob and tell him that they are to bring Benjamin with them back to Egypt to rescue the other brother and be permitted to trade in Egypt. Initially, Jacob vehemently declines. He cannot stand the thought that Benjamin might go missing. He is the only surviving child of Rachel – Jacob's great love. But after the family uses the grain that Joseph provided, and thus are out of food, Jacob finally relents and permits the brothers to take Benjamin to Egypt.

So the brothers return to Egypt with Benjamin. Contrary to what they expect, they are treated as honored guests. He then sends them all on their way with grain, but frames his brother Benjamin for thieving a silver cup, which provides the pretext for Joseph's retention of Benjamin as a slave in retribution for the supposed betrayal, but will let the

others go free. Judah, the brother who came up with the idea to sell Joseph into slavery in the first place, steps up and with a moving speech as to the father's fondness of this son, offers himself in exchange for Benjamin.

Kathryn Schifferdecker proposes that this last deception of Joseph's with his brothers really operates as a test to see if the brothers will sell Rachel's other son into slavery, or buy their own freedom at the expense of the remaining beloved son of Rachel. Judah does not readily abandon Benjamin, but steps up to offer himself in exchange so that he might keep his word to his father, and prevent even more heartache. It seems that Joseph's brothers have grown in compassion for their father, and in integrity with how they treat their younger brother.

Finally, we arrive at the point where our morning's reading begins. Joseph becomes so emotional over the change of heart and the compassion that the brothers have shown for Jacob that he sends the Egyptians out of the room and reveals his identity to the brothers. He weeps loudly and seeks to know of his father's welfare. And his brothers? They are "dismayed" to discover Joseph's identity. But Joseph draws them nearer, states his faith understanding of what has happened to him, and forgives his brothers, inviting them back into relationship with him, and asks them to go get their father, tell him how respected Joseph is in Egypt, and settle together in nearby Goshen, so that he can ensure that they are well taken care of. The family is thus restored and saved from hunger. Great story, huh? The ups and downs could rival last week on Wall Street.

Well, betrayal is an ugly thing. And it happens more frequently than we would like to admit. We sometimes betray each other out of dark characteristics like greed, or envy, or need for power and influence. Often those doing the betraying tell themselves that it is for the good or right – like Judas did with Christ. The pain of betrayal has an extra sting to it because, by definition, it comes from someone that we believe that we can trust. It is someone in a position of at least some intimacy, who has sufficient knowledge that they

can take something they learn and use it against us, or can manipulate us into doing that which the person desires for their own benefit.

Betrayal leaves us shaken, can leave us to question whether we can trust ourselves to judge the motives, credibility, or integrity of anyone. And yet without a sense that we can tell who to trust, we are lost, afraid, and very much alone. That is one reason why it is so devastating when a spouse betrays spouse, or when a pastor betrays the trust placed upon him or her in the fulfilling of pastoral duties. It is why child abuse, particularly child sexual abuse, is such a heinous act. In each situation there is a trust relationship that the betrayer uses or abuses to the detriment of the victim. In each situation there is a deception, a taking advantage of vulnerability, that offends our basic sense of what is fundamentally okay, good, right, faithful thing to do.

How does one begin to heal from the pain of having trusted one who abuses that trust? If we are honest with ourselves, forgiveness is not our forte. On one of the new shows on USA channel, a therapist is trying to help a football player with his emotional problems, which includes a deep seated anger. After a violent episode, he finally admits his anger, but asks how to get over it. She responds "forgiveness." Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation. To forgive means to release anger and hard feelings toward the person. To reconcile means to reestablish relationship with that person. Neither forgiveness nor reconciliation fully explain how one gets to a place where reconciliation becomes possible.

The Joseph story provides important clues on how reconciliation may be possible after a betrayal. First, you should notice that the brothers have repented of their wrongdoing. Forgiveness means nothing to one who does not see that he has sinned. But we know that the brothers have identified their historical actions towards Joseph as wrong and are convinced that the appearance of the money in the sacks and the silver cup in the grain sack are ways in which God is setting them up to be punished for their evil

deed. Also, it becomes apparent to Joseph that the brothers have changed. Rather than selling out a brother in order to save himself, Judah offers himself in place of Benjamin to prevent causing tremendous grief to the father. From the scripture, it appears that it was this repentance – turning away from the previous sin and “doing it right” this time is what touched Joseph so much that, along with his feelings of loneliness and loss of his family over the years, moved Joseph to tears and moved him to reach out to reconcile with his family.

There is another factor at play here though that helps Joseph tremendously. That is the theological lens through which he views what has happened. Joseph views all that has happened from the perspective of how it all worked out to benefit God and God’s people in the end. Although the brothers had intended evil, God worked through the circumstances to protect the integrity of God’s promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and keep the remnant alive.

Please be careful here. Joseph did not attribute the bad actions of his brothers to God – he confronts them with the truth of their deed, but moves on to recognize that God has worked through the circumstances that they created, worked to bring him to Egypt and set up so that things would work out in the end.

What do you think? During his time riding in the caravan, looking forward to slavery, was Joseph certain of the reality of God’s ability to work through history? Perhaps he clung to that hope – while not yet being able to see how it would or even could happen. Just as in our pain and suffering we often do not see how God will use what is happening to benefit the Kingdom. When we are facing a hardship with or without an accompanying betrayal, loss of job or loss of home to foreclosure, or loss of health or loss of abilities to old age or infirmity, our first thought probably is not “how wonderful, God has something to work with here!” or “great, fertile ground for a miracle!” But having faith that God does work in, through, and sometimes (often) in spite of the folks that cause havoc in our lives’ will do wonders to help us sur-

vive the crisis. But to believe in the midst of crisis requires viewing life with eyes of faith.

I think that when Joseph was placed on the caravan wagon, betrayed by those closest to him—his family, he could hardly have envisioned what was to come, even though he had had dreams that suggested he would be in a position of power over his brothers. Throughout the ordeal, though, Joseph acted consistently with his faith. He worked diligently for his master, won people over; he declined the advances of a woman that was his master's wife; he acted faithfully while in prison, giving God the glory when he interpreted dreams of his fellow prisoners, and, although he "played on his brothers' guilt", he did nothing close to what he had the power to do. He could have had them executed. I would suggest to you that the only way he was able to act in the manner that he did was because he was a man of faith. He rested in the knowledge that God would make all things right, that God's would prevail in the end. The scriptures tell us that "God was with Joseph" -- he prospered in service, in prison, and everywhere he went. There was "something about him" suggesting that he accepted God's presence and acted accordingly. Without the assurance that God would prevail in the end, it would have been much more difficult for Joseph to reach beyond his devastation and loss to a place of forgiveness and reconciliation with his brothers.

Where are the betrayals in your life that cry out for reconciliation? How can the eyes of faith help heal the wounds? What would it take to let go the death grip you may have on old hurts, slights, or offenses? How long will we deny ourselves reconciliation with those who repent of the pain they have caused? How do we see God working in our midst to bring about the Kingdom we declare every week that we yearn for "Your Kingdom come . . ." A kingdom in which we love one another, live and flourish together, grow in our spirits and in our ranks, a place where God is with us present always – and we act accordingly.

My brothers and sisters, may you repent of your betrayals as Joseph's brothers did, may you be graced with the

faith to see God's hand at work in your life's circumstance, and may you ready yourself to reconcile with those who repent of their wrongdoing against you. For every week, we also pray that God "Forgive our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us . . ." Amen.