

September 6, 2009

The Power of a Meal

Genesis 44-45

Marjorie and Harold were married in 1935 in Nanaimo, on Vancouver Island. Harold worked in a hardware store in town. His boss and his wife were the only others who came to the wedding.

You see, Harold had come to Canada at age 18 from England. He had worked at a variety of odd jobs, mostly labouring, around southwestern BC. For a while he lived near Abbotsford in the Fraser Valley. There he was a farm hand for the Greens, the first settlers in a newly logged area. Although the Greens were not that well-to-do, they did own a farm and did come from well-bred, well-heeled families in Britain. Mrs. Green, in particular, had grown up in an aristocratic home and knew what being "proper" was all about. So when Harold and their eldest daughter Marjorie started seeing each other, something had to be done!

Harold was sent packing! He was fired and told - in no uncertain terms - to not only leave Marjorie alone, but to leave town. Marjorie was given several stern lectures about who she ought to consider worthy of her affections. Harold ended up in Nanaimo working in this hardware store. Marjorie ran away from home and married him! Her parents were furious! Especially her mother! They would not attend the wedding. They would not communicate with the couple. Even after children were born, there was no contact. Nothing! Complete separation.

In many cultures, a person can do something which is considered so terrible that family and friends are to treat that person as though they were dead. The relationship is over. Gone. Complete separation.

The Greens came from (nominally anyway) Christian backgrounds. As a Christian, how do you feel about their behaviour? Why? Why not? What biblical principles come to mind ...?

"Be sure your sins will find you out ..."

Joseph's family, back in Canaan, are starving during a famine. So Joseph's brothers come down to buy grain in Egypt, which - thanks to Joseph's God-inspired wisdom - has plenty of food. Joseph recognizes his brothers - the same ones who had sold him into slavery - instantly. But they didn't recognize him. Why would they? They were quite sure he is "no more" (42:13).

They had been carrying a load of guilt for more than two decades about that terrible incident. So now, during their second trip for food, when this powerful Egyptian official announces he is Joseph, they were (understatement) surprised: they *"were not able to answer him, because they were terrified ..."* (45:3) Was the man just pretending? But *"he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him and Pharaoh's household heard about it"* (43:2). This was not an act!

For years Joseph's brothers had assumed he was dead. For years they had escaped

accountability for their behaviour. But their sins had found them out, as sins inevitably do. And their fate lay in the hands of the one whom they had wronged. If you were Judah or Simeon or one of the others, how would you feel?

Ever since the days of Adam and Eve, people have preferred to cover up their sins rather than confront them, confess them, and be forgiven. We are all like that. Because we don't want to face the consequences. Or we don't want to admit we might have been wrong. Or we don't want to have to go cap-in-hand to someone else. Surely we can cover things up. Or we can blame other people. Or we can tell other lies to cover up the first lies. Maybe they'll just go away ...

If you were Joseph, what would you do?

Joseph had suffered terribly at their hands. He held all the cards and could play them exactly as he wished. His brothers were completely at his mercy. *"Come close to me ..."* Joseph said, *"Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you ..."* (45:4-5) Is that what you would have said? No blame? No anger? No revenge? Joseph explains how what had happened was really a blessing. Joseph holds the truth in tension - on the one hand he reminds them that *"you sold" me ...* on the other hand he tells them *"God sent me."*

It is interesting that Joseph says *"God sent me"* three times (verses 5, 7, 8). His brothers had sold him in a spontaneous act of anger!

One aspect of God's wisdom in Scripture is that when people ask the *"why?"* question - *"Why is this happening to me?"* or *"Why do bad things happen to good people?"* - there is almost never a clear answer. God rarely, if ever, reveals definitive reasons. The "why" may simply be that in a fallen world, marred by human sin, bad things happen. For good or bad, God has given people, like freedom to choose - their choices may hurt themselves and others. Sometimes bad things "just happen." We can look for answers to "why?" all we want. We'll rarely find them.

This gets us into a deep theological debate between those who argue that everything that happens to us is pre-determined or pre-destined by God, and those who believe we make our own choices (free will). What Joseph shows us is that the debate is really irrelevant.

In down-to-earth, practical terms it doesn't really matter WHY we are where we are, what matters is that we're there! William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, ministered among the brutally poor of London. He put it all together when he said: *"Work as if everything depended on your work, and pray as if everything depended on your prayer."*

What the Bible does help us think through is the *"how?"* issue - *"So bad things have happened, how then do I go on?"* or *"There is so much evil in the world, how then do I live?"* How we live is as people of God, with hope, integrity, vision, and faith - even in the midst of pain and evil.

What we see in Joseph is a remarkable ability to see God at work even in the most difficult of

circumstances. He remembers that even in the darkest times, God never forgets him. He remembers to be faithful to the Lord and do what is right even when the stakes were high. And he has constantly looked out for the interests of others - because of him Potiphar, a jailer, a cupbearer, and now Pharaoh prospered. He loved his neighbour as himself. Now, when Joseph has every right to get back at his brothers, he again extends love: *"Come close ..."*

Is that what you would have done?

We don't know how Joseph's brothers reacted. Did they make excuses? Did they bluster about? Did they mumble some nonsense about trying to make it up to Joseph? Did they blame one another? It is hard to confess and acknowledge our sins. It is almost as hard to accept forgiveness!

But Joseph was going to emphasize in every way possible that his forgiveness was absolutely sincere. Pharaoh joined him in inviting the whole family to Egypt to live in comfort and security (45:20). Knowing his brothers as he did, as Joseph sent them back home to bring Jacob and the rest of the family down to Egypt, he warns, *"Don't quarrel on the way!"* (45:24).

If you were one of Joseph's brothers, what would you say to Jacob? *"Joseph is still alive! In fact, he is ruler of all Egypt!"* (45:26). That part is easy! But during the long journey to Egypt the conversation continues: *"So how did this happen,"* Jacob asks you. What would you say? Could you tell the truth?

Back to the basics ... again

The story of Joseph keeps bringing us back to key themes we need to remember. **First, God truly is in control.** He will ultimately prevail with or without our cooperation! He always remembers us. He never leaves us!

Do you feel like you've been sold out? Do you feel like doing what is right has cost you? Do you feel like others have betrayed you? Joseph offers you no easy answers for why these bad things happen to good people. But he does offer a way through them. The "high road" he chooses is one that sees the opportunity in crisis. One that sees a faithful God still in control. One that believes Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Second, when we put God first in our lives - when we strive to do what is right - He will be with us. Even when it seems like Joseph's faithfulness to God cost him a lot God is able to bring even greater blessings out of difficult circumstances.

What is the most important thing in your life? Let me rephrase that ... if you had an important decision to make, what criteria would you use? Would you ask questions like - how much will it cost me? what will other people think? do I have the time? Or do you ask questions like: what is right? what would God have me do? Has God sent me for just such a time as this?

Another thought ... how do you know what God would have you do? how do you know what is right? Do you learn most of what you know about God from television? from books? from church? Or do you learn most of what you know about God from the Bible (not what someone says the Bible says!)? from prayer? One of the great privileges we have as twentieth century North American believers is the ability to read Scripture in our own language, for ourselves ... do we do that? Or do we allow "priests" to interpret it for us?

Third, love. Love your neighbour as yourselves. *"Love each other as I have loved you,"* Jesus said. Joseph had every right to be vindictive. But he reached out in love. The victim of unspeakable wickedness held these men's lives in his hands, yet he reaches out his hands, and extends them full and free forgiveness. *"Then he threw his arms around his brother ... and he kissed all his brothers and wept over them ..."* (45:14-15)

Are you a forgiving person? Can you forgive the faults of others? It is hard. I know it's hard! It is only God's grace that gives us that ability. But it is a miracle when we can!

How good are you at receiving forgiveness? Joseph was betrayed by his brothers and presumed dead. Yet when he found them he said, *"Come close ..."* Another man was betrayed and abandoned by his "brothers." He did die. But he rose to life on third day. What did he do? To Thomas he stretches out his hands: *"Put your finger here; see my hands"* (John 20:27). To Peter, who denied him, he extends full and free forgiveness: *"Feed my sheep"* (John 21:17). To all of us Jesus says: *"For God so loved you, and all the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned ..."* but saved! (John 3:16-18) The victim of unspeakable wickedness holds our lives in his hands, yet he reaches out those hands and extends us full and free forgiveness. Can you accept it?

As we celebrate the Lord's Supper this morning, it is an opportunity to meet Jesus. To accept His invitation to come close and be restored in our relationship with Him. It is also an invitation to think about which of our "brothers" have done us wrong. Who do I need to forgive? What do I need to let go of?

My opening story has a happy ending. Many years later my great grandparents - the Greens - finally agreed to accept Harold Martin into the family. I don't remember them much ... but I do remember my grandparents, Harold and Marjorie, visiting her mother - who had Alzheimer's disease - every day for almost five years. That is the power of forgiveness. That is the power of love.

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