

Talking With Our Brothers and Sisters

Genesis 45:3-11; 15

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.

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.

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 five more years in which there will be

neither plowing nor harvest.

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;

God has made me a father to Pharaoh,

and lord of all his house

and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

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.

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.

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.'

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

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Genesis 45:3-11, 15

February 23, 2025

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I.

(Take off pulpit robe, put on the vest.)

Weird things happen. Weird wild, and weird wonderful. Not only is that the gist of this morning's sermon, that it is the gist of life. The only question is, just *how* weirdly wild or wonderful?!?

Today's scripture reading from Genesis 45 catches the tail-end of the remarkable saga of Joseph, which is an epiphanal moment in the story arc of the 12 Tribes of Israel, those descended from Sarah and Abraham, as told in the Hebrew Scriptures. In order to fully appreciate today's reading we must, first, understand the familial backstory of how we arrived at this moment of conversation between Joseph and his brothers set within the larger biblical context. To do so, we will need to cover a great deal of ground rather quickly. *Then*, I will tell you why I am wearing this vest today.

II.

Once upon a time, long, long ago, God appeared to an elderly and childless couple named Sari and Abram (later Sarah and Abraham). God tells them to pick up stakes and go to a land which God will show them and also promises to them and, there, God will make a great nation of their descendants. God forms a covenant with them, what we call the Abrahamic covenant (as opposed to the Noahic which came earlier, and Davidic which was to follow). God says:

I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2-3)

After quite a bit of rigamarole, a son is born to them, Isaac. Seeking to test their faithfulness to God and the Covenant which has been made, God commands Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the promised child so long in coming. Just before he does so, God waves off Abraham and provides, instead, a sacrificial ram.

III.

Isaac grows up and marries Rebekah and they have twins boys, Jacob and Esau. Jacob (whom Rebekah favored) is a wily character and cheats his brother Esau (whom Isaac favored) out of his birthright. Fearing Esau's wrath, Jacob escapes to Haran in Mesopotamia. Many years go by, but eventually the brothers reconcile.

In the interim, and by way of some more rigmarole, Jacob first marries Leah, then her sister Rachel (whom he favored). Jacob fathers 13 children, 12 sons and one daughter (Dinah) by four different women: seven by Leah; two by Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid; two by Zilpah, Leah's handmaid; and, after God opened her womb, two by Rachel. Together, the descendants of these 12 sons, Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph, and Benjamin constitute the 12 Tribes of Israel. Rachel's sons, the youngest, were Joseph and Benjamin. Unfortunately, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.

IV.

Of these 12 sons, Jacob favored Joseph. As a sign of his affection for him, Jacob gave Joseph a fancy coat of many colors (or a Technicolor Dreamcoat, which was pretty Amazing; or so says Broadway). However, neither the coat or the paternal favoritism it represented sat very well with Joseph's 11 brothers. One day they threw him, and his coat, into a pit and, then, sold him into slavery to a Arab caravan which just "happened" to be passing by. Eventually Joseph was brought to Egypt where he was sold to Potiphar, one Pharaoh's ministers.

After even more rigmarole (and if you haven't figured it out already, there is an awful lot of rigamarole in the Bible) Joseph becomes Pharaoh's second in command owing to his ability to interpret dreams. The most significant of which portended 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of famine. As a result of this, Egyptian granaries were full while famine descended upon the rest of an otherwise unsuspecting Middle East; Joseph's homeland of Canaan included.

V.

Seeking food to survive, Joseph's brothers travel to Egypt and discover Joseph still very much alive, greatly prospering and, now, holding a position of power such that through him their lives might be saved. Today's scripture reading picks up with the reunion between Joseph and his brothers who had cast him in a pit and had sold him into slavery a great many years before.

Things get very weird for Joseph's brothers as they begin to realize the long, convoluted plan that God enacted, through *them*, in fidelity to the covenant made to their Great-grandparents, Abraham and Sarah. In what must be one of the most gracious and forgiving moments in the entire Bible, Joseph says to his brothers:

Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for 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. 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."

VI.

Now I would like to tell you about this vest. It was a gift given to me many years ago by Bill Webb; apparently it was too big for him, so he passed it on to me. Though it was a little too tight for me at the time, I eagerly accepted it precisely because it was from Bill. Since then I have changed quite a bit, such that now it is a perfect fit. I wear it every day under my green Carhartt jacket and think about Bill Webb each time I don it.

Today is Bill Webb Grill Day and "Summer" Picnic Potluck. We are thankful to the Webb family for directing memorial gifts given for him to allow us to purchase "Bill's Grill." It is my great hope that this will become a new tradition at our church to be held every year on the last Sunday in February. Unbeknownst to us when we picked the date (our second attempt) we had not realized it coincided with the one year anniversary of Bill's death this Tuesday February 25th. Hopefully this will become a yearly event to remember Bill, and to have a little fun to help get us through the long, North Country winter.

VII.

I first met Bill Webb 27 years ago this month, a few weeks after the devastating ice storm that had struck this region. Bill was a member of the Search Committee which brought me to this church, and they all greeted me down in the foyer immediately upon my arrival; there were no video interviews back then. Linda didn't make the trip which, in hindsight, was a strategic mistake on my part.

We were all standing in a circle talking and I remember shaking hands and introducing myself to each person (Vicki McLain and Barry Walch also among them) and, out of the corner of my eye, I saw Bill's head, with his high and tight, flattop haircut, dip ever so slightly and shake ever so subtly. My guess is, he wasn't even aware he did it. Being married to an irrepressible wife in Lorna, raising four very spirited daughters, and having his mother-in-law living with him, *my* guess is that's a gesture he made *all* the time. What else *can* you do when that is *all* you can do? I talked to Bill about this one time. Unsurprisingly he didn't remember, but I sure do.

VIII.

Not unlike the moment Joseph stood talking with his brothers, it was a very weird moment for both of us as we each tried to decide if, indeed, this was part of some kind of long, convoluted plan God was enacting through *us*, in fidelity to the covenant made to this church. Or, the *other* possibility, was that this was simply going to be a *very* bad idea. It was either one or the other, about that there was no question. Recognize the previous minister, Rev. Dick Stone, had retired after serving for 29 years so *any* change was going to be a *big* change right out the chute.

I think Bill mostly held his breath. God bless him, though, Bill went with it. He was never anything but helpful and fair. For many years before I arrived (and for many years after) Bill and Lorna were the volunteer treasurers at the church, so there were numerous of points of contact between us. For the first little while we each took the measure of the other, comfortable to let the jury remain in recess. Then, things started to change. Slowly. We started talking.

IX.

Bill was a Banker by trade and profession. However, later in life, after he retired, Bill worked at the Lawrence Funeral home helping with funerals and driving. Bill was a pro with the public, he only did a job to do it well, and he knew a *ton* of people so he was perfect in the role. He was also a very calm, cool, and collected cat. Which isn't to say he wasn't a worrier, but he sure didn't let it show.

One day Bill and I got paired to make a couple of hour drive together to do a graveside service downstate. I would be his passenger as he drove the funeral coach (hearse). Needless to say, this gave us some time to talk. I am all for chit-chat on the brief jaunts to Evergreen Cemetery here in town, but this was half a day of driving so there was no real choice but to get down to it. Less a "pour your heart out" kind of conversation it was more a "pour your life out" type of thing. By the time we got back to Canton the deal was sealed and our relationship set. Bill was the *real* McCoy, and he saw I respected that.

X.

There is a similar moment in today's scripture reading which mirrors a real life moment you and I face almost every day. In many ways, it is also the same kind of moment in which our nation now finds itself. A moment of decision when we have to choose if we are going to talk with our brothers and sisters; even in spite of enormous differences, complicated personal histories, or bad blood. The outcome of such a moment is almost always dictated by the willingness for at least one of the parties to exhibit some degree of graciousness.

Joseph's brothers recognize the moment for what it is: their chickens have come home to roost. Remember, Joseph is second in command of *all* of Egypt. Refusing them food is the *least* he could do. Instead, he decides to save his brothers from the consequences of their own actions, pettiness, bad intent, and a whole lot of much deserved bad karma. Not only does Joseph forgive all of that, he comes to understand the moment within the context of God's long, convoluted plan. And, so, Joseph kissed all his brothers and wept upon them. Then, after *all* of that, his brothers *talked* with him.

XI.

Not unlike this vest, when I first I arrived here at this church the fit was a little tight. While the congregation has certainly changed over the course of the past quarter century, the greater change has occurred in me. Not because of any effort on my part, but through the graciousness offered to me by a whole host of people, some still here among us while many are not, who, over time, made this a perfect fit. I would place Bill and Lorna Webb at the very front of this group. Not only were they ever gracious in every situation (and believe me, we found ourselves in some very tough spots over the years) they were always delighted to talk. Which, as it turns out, is the key.

XII.

This willingness to have the conversation, as I have discovered over the years, is what lies at the heart of a healthy, vibrant, and positively impactful church. I would also argue that the same is true for our nation and her people. Conversation, and our willingness to have it, is the means of change in every moment. Typically, it is an opportunity we do not see coming, but we will know it when it arrives. As did Joseph, as did Bill.

Just about every meaningful change which takes place in the Bible, and in life, occurs by way of the conduit of conversation. Not chit-chat, but conversations which are honest, heart-felt, and meaningful; those that require us to *listen* as well as talk. Talking with our brothers and sisters is the way we can truly change the world. Why? Because such conversations are always part of God's long, convoluted plan for this world. Which is where it gets weird. The only question is just *how* weirdly wild or weirdly wonderful?!? The one way to find out, is to keep talking with our brothers and sisters. Amen.