

REUNION TIME

A Sermon by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Genesis 45:1-15

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For many families, summertime is reunion time. Perhaps some of you here today have already attended or are planning to attend a family reunion this summer. You know how it goes – the date is set, typically well ahead. For some, it is the same weekend every year. You may gather at the same place year after year or perhaps you rotate around to different family homes or other locations. Whenever and wherever reunions happen, they are about seeing and connecting with relatives. Some of the relatives you see may be ones you regularly see throughout the year, but typically there are others you only tend to see when attending a family reunion or some other significant family event like a wedding or funeral.

As a child, I remember the Fourth of July was the yearly date for our “Jacobson” family reunion. Most often, those reunions took place at my uncle’s house in Newbury, but sometimes it was at our house in Mayfield Village. The reunions on my mom’s side were less frequent, and those locations varied. Here in this town, the Blossom Festival is like a big annual reunion time for the extended family that is this Chagrin Falls community. Life and location, jobs and responsibilities have a way of separating families, so the purpose of a reunion is to bring the family back together.

Clearly, there is much in this life that leads to separation. Some of that separation is beyond our control and actions, and some of it is a result of our personal decisions and actions. The separation we experience may simply be the mileage that separates one family member’s home from another family member’s home. There are those serving in the military who must leave their families to serve their tour of duty. There are those families who live in war-torn places and who are separated by the violent and destructive acts of war. There are also those who break the law and are separated from their loved ones as they serve prison sentences.

But then there are the separations that are the result of the awful dividing power of anger, resentment, fear, greed, betrayal, neglect, abuse, and politics. The political divide over these past several years has become like spreading cancer as it impacts and divides families, churches, communities, as well as the world. In our nation, there are regularly disturbing images of families being cruelly torn apart and separated on purpose simply because some in authority have decided they don’t belong. It’s difficult enough to see the impact of breakups, separations, and divorces within our own families and among friends, but it’s even worse when violent separation is an accepted and enforced policy.

It is well proven by experts, but it’s also easy to see with our own eyes that separation is hurtful and damaging. It leads to all kinds of long-term, unhealthy psychological as well as physical conditions. Considering the dividing reality and impact of separation in our society, as well as the severity of its impact especially

on children but on all of us, I think the story of Joseph and his brothers in Genesis is especially poignant for us today.

As we look at Joseph, it's not difficult to see that he was an especially irritating brother; he thought quite highly of himself, and he didn't hesitate to express those thoughts to his ten older brothers. This tension between Joseph and his older brothers was accentuated by their father, Jacob, who didn't even try to hide the fact that Joseph was his favorite son. Over the years, Jacob regularly stoked the underlying fires of resentment that already existed between his sons by giving Joseph special attention and gifts, like the "long robe with sleeves" (Genesis 37:3). In Genesis chapter 37, several years before our lesson today, we can read how the brother's angry resentment finally came to a boiling point. Joseph's brothers threw him into a pit, and they conspired to kill him. But they couldn't quite bring themselves to commit the act of murder, so instead they sold him into slavery. Joseph was taken to Egypt, his brothers told their father, Jacob, that he was killed by a wild animal, and the family was separated by anger, betrayal, distance and lies.

But, "*The Lord was with Joseph*" (Genesis 39:2) in Egypt, and he ended up becoming a successful manager in the house of an Egyptian officer by the name of Potiphar. Joseph was not only a handsome young man, he was also described as intelligent and unusually insightful. He had the ability to see and understand things that others did not. He did very well managing Potiphar's house. But Potiphar's wife took notice of Joseph and tried to seduce him. When Joseph refused to satisfy her lust, it resulted in an act of bitter revenge from Potiphar's wife as a lie told to her husband landed Joseph in jail (39:1-23).

But once again we are told that "*the Lord was with Joseph*" (Genesis 39:21), so he became the favorite prisoner of the chief jailer. Knowing the Lord's presence even in life's most difficult circumstances makes all the difference. Joseph's ability to interpret dreams helped him get out of jail and to eventually rise to the position of governor, second-in-command to Pharaoh himself (41:37-45). It is after he rose to this position of power that Joseph is reunited with his brothers. He hadn't seen them for many years, since that day when they threw him into a pit and then sold him into slavery. There could have been angry, bitter words. There could have been severe punishment from the now powerful Joseph, but instead their reunion became a healing of broken relationships.

What led to the reunion was a severe famine that came upon the Land of Canaan, where Jacob and his sons lived. Joseph's brothers traveled to Egypt to buy grain. They meet with the governor, not recognizing that he is Joseph, and ask for his assistance. Now it wasn't all hugs at first, Joseph toys with them a bit, and even throws them into prison for a short while. In our passage for today, Joseph reveals himself to them by saying, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt" (Genesis 45:4). I imagine their jaws hit the floor, and there was some shaking in their sandals. But this is not a story about holding grudges and seeking revenge. This is a story about a family reunion; it is a story about forgiveness and reconciliation.

Joseph and his brothers remind us that even when harsh words have been spoken, hurtful actions have been taken and separation has occurred, reconciliation

is not only possible, but it is clearly God's desire for us. Because of God's abiding and guiding presence that which had initially been an evil act of betrayal, violence, and forced separation became the blessing of a reunion where grace was offered and redemption experienced. Yes, there was estrangement, and that estrangement reflects the pain all of us experience from time to time in this life amidst our broken relationships and separations. But fortunately, our text leads us to a place where anger and estrangement are replaced with forgiveness and reconciliation.

Notice in our passage that Joseph says to his brothers, "Come closer to me" (Genesis 45:4). I love those simple and yet profound words from Joseph, "*Come closer...*" It can be very hard to make that first move, but someone must make it. Not only does faith compel us to take the first step, but it also leads us through what are often multiple steps on the journey towards reconciliation's goal of reuniting and restoring a relationship. But the journey must begin somewhere, with an invitation, an extended hand, a phone call, a smile, perhaps even a hug. This is not an overlooking or dismissing of past wrong and hurtful actions, but it is a way of closing the gap those acts created and recognizing that we are human beings who are sometimes overcome by emotions, who succumb to evil intentions, and who make mistakes.

"*Come closer*" is an invitation to begin a process. Instead of a stubborn hardening of your heart and saying, "go away, I don't want to ever see or talk to you again," it is an opening of your heart and an inviting of that other person into your life. The process of reconciliation cannot begin when people are sitting on opposite sides of a room or when they refuse to even be in the same room together. Reconciliation cannot begin if both sides stubbornly refuse to move closer. Reconciliation and reunion happen when individuals or groups or nations are willing to come closer and build bridges together! Even though Joseph was the one offended, he was the one who took the first step of extending an invitation to his brothers. That first step was an act of faith. That step was not a sign of weakness but was instead a sign of strength. It was a sign of God's love working inside and moving through Joseph.

Joseph then says, "*And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here*" (Genesis 45:5). Joseph not only let go of his own hurt and the awful offense committed against him by his brothers, but he also extended grace to his brothers. He not only forgave them, he also gave them permission to lay aside the guilt they had been carrying around because of their sinful behavior. It would have been easy, and many might say Joseph would have been justified not to forgive, to instead be angry, lay on the guilt, and even punish his brothers. But he didn't. Instead, he tells his brothers to let go of the guilt caused by their bad behavior – guilt that had continued to impact their lives, making them less than who God had created them to be.

Joseph then goes on to say, "*For God sent me before you to preserve life... So it was not you who sent me here, but God*" (Genesis 45:5-8). As Joseph released his brothers from the guilt of their actions, he described his experience of God's continuing and redeeming presence in all that happened to him. In other words, God took their ugly actions and their forced separation and brought something good out of it. Yes, the brothers intended evil for Joseph, but God's redemptive power

had taken his brother's sinful acts and transformed the potentially ugly outcome into a blessed outcome.

When Joseph invited his brothers to come closer, he made it clear that he had forgiven them; he described the ways in which God had been at work in his life, and he told them to let go of their guilt so that they could experience the blessing of God's grace. But he didn't even stop there and send them on their way. He said something else; he said, *"I will provide for you..."* (Genesis 45:11). Joseph didn't simply forgive and dismiss his brothers, he chose to enter fully into their lives and to make a positive, life-giving, difference. He gave them the grain they needed, and he reestablished an ongoing relationship with them. Because of Joseph God's plan for saving not only Joseph's family but countless other families from possible starvation was realized.

Clearly, Joseph's life did not turn out as he had originally envisioned as a teenager back in Canaan, and yet he continued to experience God's presence and leading. This does not mean that when evil, distress, or separation impacts our lives that God is the author of the mess, but it does say that in all circumstances of our lives, God's desire is to lead us to a hopeful, redemptive, reconciling outcome. God is an expert at redeeming our messes – our sins, struggles, heartaches, separations, and losses.

In Joseph's willingness to forgive and to be reunited with his brothers, we see the type of attitude and faith that leads to the blessing of true reconciliation. This reconciliation is God's plan for the world. For *"In Christ God was reconciling the world unto himself, not counting our trespasses against us, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us"* (2 Corinthians 5:19). In the life and message of Jesus Christ, the power of God's reconciling grace was fully revealed. Resentment and separation do not honor God, because it is forgiveness and reconciliation that reside in the heart of God. Holding a grudge and acts of revenge do not honor God, because God is known through acts of love and grace.

God calls people of faith like you and me to be agents of God's gracious love and reconciliation within our families, church, neighborhood, nation and world. There is way too much in the world these days causing separation and heartache. There are way too many people engaging in acts based on fear, anger, hatred and revenge. There are way too many leaders and policies that are promoting judgment, retaliation, and cruelty.

The One God in whose image all humans are created has shown us a different and much better way – it is the way of love and reconciliation. Today, we have seen in the life of Joseph, God's desire for forgiveness and reconciliation. And we have heard in the Apostle Paul's words that God's greatest act of reconciliation was accomplished through Jesus Christ. To be a Jesus follower is to know that the characteristics of love and reconciliation are not only at the heart of God, but they are characteristics that are also meant to live and thrive within the hearts and lives of each one of us. As Jesus' followers, let us lean into God's merciful and reconciling love that we may be vessels of God's redemptive power in the world. Clearly, it's time for our community, our nation, and this world to know the joyous blessing that is reunion! May it be so to the glory of God! Amen.