

## **Truth and Reconciliation (or, The Power of Hugs)**

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Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

11th Sunday after Pentecost - August 16, 2020

Texts: Joseph narrative, Genesis 37-50; Matthew 15:21-28

SCRIPTURE READING Adapted from Genesis 40-47 Whatever happened to him, Joseph rose to the top. When his brothers conspired against him, he came out alive. As a slave in Egypt, he came to command his master Potiphar's entire household. Potiphar's wife tried to ensnare him, and when he resisted, he was falsely accused and sent to prison. Yet even in prison, he was trusted and put in charge of other prisoners. In prison he met two servants of Pharaoh. Both had dreams that Joseph correctly interpreted: one was hanged, the other restored to his place. Years later, Pharaoh himself had troubling dreams of seven fat cows that were devoured by seven thin cows; and of seven full ears of corn that were absorbed by seven meager ears. The servant remembered Joseph in prison and his powers of interpretation. Always giving God the credit, Joseph predicted that seven years of plenty would be followed by seven years of famine. Pharaoh appointed Joseph, only 30 years old, to be overseer, to store resources for the lean years, and rewarded him lavishly.

When all came about as Joseph had predicted, and the famine walked the land, Joseph's family in Canaan heard of food for sale in Egypt. Accordingly, his ten older brothers traveled to Egypt to purchase food. Joseph recognized them, though they didn't know him. He put them to various tests, inquiring about their father and ordering them to bring their youngest brother, Benjamin, when they returned. Once again, he tested their loyalty, framing Benjamin for stealing his personal cup, and threatening to take him as his slave. When he saw that his brothers were intent upon protecting this youngest brother, he revealed himself to them. With Pharaoh's blessing, Joseph brought his entire family to settle in Egypt. After Jacob's death, the brothers again expressed fear that Joseph would take revenge on them for their previous cruelty. Joseph answered, "Don't be afraid! You may have intended it for harm, but God meant it for good, to preserve a great people here." And the descendants of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, and Jacob and his twelve sons grew strong and numerous in Egypt.

*Matthew 15:21-28 Jesus has been teaching and healing near the inland sea of Galilee, where he also fed a multitude with a few scraps of food, and walked on water. Not only do the crowds follow him, but a group of Pharisees have traveled all the way from Jerusalem to criticize him on a point of doctrine: handwashing (about food ritual, not hygiene). He refutes them, saying, "It's not what goes into the body that's a problem, it's what comes out of the heart: that is, thoughts, words, and actions that are hurtful and destructive."*

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

There's healing, and then there's healing. To be healed, you have to accept that you're sick and need help. You have to know where to go for help. And you have to be willing to ask.

The woman who confronted Jesus was not a citizen of Israel. She was a foreigner, an alien. But she knew her daughter was sick. She knew her daughter needed help. And she knew where to go to find it: that miracle worker across the border in Palestine. That guy called Jesus.

Jesus had more than enough on his plate already. He was swarmed by crowds wherever he went. Maybe he was getting just a teensy bit tired of everyone and his uncle needing just one more miracle. You're not my problem, he told her. Israel is. "I can't throw the children's food to the dogs." She said, "Don't treat me as less than a dog, then! Even dogs get leftovers." He gave her more than leftovers; he healed her daughter. And she taught him a lesson he would never forget. There's healing and then there's healing. Jesus' eyes needed healing to see her as God's child.

Joseph came from a family that needed healing. Twelve brothers had four mothers; and neither mothers nor sons always got along. Joseph was the favorite son of a favorite wife. Benjamin was his full brother, sharing mother and father. Yes, biblically sanctioned marriage took many forms. What wasn't sanctioned was the festering hatred that drove the other brothers to sell Joseph to Egypt where he suffered as a slave, experienced racism as a "Hebrew" alien, and spent long years in prison on false charges. Nevertheless, he worked through all of it and rose to be second only to Pharaoh, the god-king of Egypt. Through the first part of the story, Joseph is sort of a 2-dimensional figure - devout and righteous, but speaking for God in a pre-recorded sort of way. He acquires an Egyptian wife in what sounds like a political marriage. He gives his two sons names that honor God for repairing his fortunes. But there's healing, and then there's healing.

It's only when his brothers trudge in, hungry and desperate from the famine in Canaan, that he seems to start feeling his feelings. He speaks to them through an interpreter, hiding his identity. When he overhears them confess their remorse for what they did to him years before, he has to turn aside or leave the room to hide his tears. Outwardly, he maintains the appearance of an Egyptian ruler, haughty, aloof, and dangerously capricious - accusing them of spying, threatening them. Inwardly, he's still a hurting child. What Joseph really needs is a great big hug. Throughout the rest of the story (which is long and complicated and worth more attention than it's getting here), it is encounters with his older brothers, with his younger brother Benjamin, son of his own dead mother, and with his aged father that bring him to tears. It's as though all the pain and hurt and regret that have festered within him for half a lifetime are finally transformed. Finally, the truth comes out. Then there are more tears, outrageously loud sobs alarming the Egyptians, and group hugs. The Bible calls it, "falling on each other's necks." I love that image.

We're hungry for hugs these days, aren't we? Sometimes the only language that says it all is a hug. Hugs happen if we're lucky enough to live with someone huggable. But grandmas and grandpas are mostly off limits. For deaths, births, and weddings, we get masks and six-foot

distances, no hugs. People in nursing homes, they say now, are dying as much from hug deprivation as from covid. I don't know about you but since March I've had dreams about falling on people's necks, embracing total strangers. Because nothing heals like a good hug.

No matter how rich and important Joseph got, no matter how much he *talked* about God and grace, I think his real healing and his family's healing didn't start until they met face to face, and the truth came out, and forgiveness happened in tears and in hugs. The miracle is not just that Joseph's family got to come to Egypt and survive a famine, the miracle is that they really saw each other and shared their truth. The miracle in the Jesus story is not just that the woman's daughter got healed but that she confronted him with her truth and he saw her not as an alien but as God's own child, and saw her sick daughter as God's own beloved. His eyes were opened, healed. I'll bet if he could, he would have hugged her for that. Who knows, maybe he did?

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission played a huge role in healing post-*apartheid* South Africa. For those too young to remember, *apartheid* was a legalized, government-sponsored form of racist terrorism. Police and other government agents arrested, imprisoned, tortured and murdered Black people *with impunity*. That means, they basically did whatever they wanted and got off scot-free. Many times, family members never knew what had happened to their loved ones. After *apartheid* was abolished, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission gave victims and survivors a chance to meet their persecutors face to face. People spoke truth. People listened.

One powerful story to emerge from that time was of an elderly South African woman who listened to the confession of the man who had brutally murdered her husband and her son. She had been forced to witness her husband's death. The judge asked what she wanted from this man. "I would like three things," she said. "First, to be taken to the place where their bodies were burned, to gather their ashes and give them a proper burial. My husband and son were my only family; so second, I would like this man to visit my home twice a month and become my family so that I can give him the love I still have to share. And third, I would like someone to lead me across the courtroom so I can take him in my arms and embrace him, to let him know he is truly forgiven." The man fainted, overwhelmed.\*

This is healing power, the healing power of God, who gathers us all into one great embrace. Problems arise, as my friend Kara likes to say, because, "We forget we belong to God, and we forget we belong to each other." We forget, in other words, that we were made by love, in love, for love, to love and to be loved. Until our eyes are healed, until we see each other face to face and speak and hear each others' truths, the ugly truths as well as the beautiful ones, the hurts within us will never heal. And that means we will keep passing our pain on to others. Pain that is not transformed is transmitted. Hurt that is allowed to fester will infect the world.

Today we stand eye to eye with some of the greatest crises of our lifetimes. And from now until November, you know we will also hear some of the most divisive rhetoric of our lifetimes. Some of it may be coming out of ourselves. Take just one minute to let your feelings about these

calamities surface. Be honest with yourself, about yourself. Anger is not off-limits. If you need to do so, mute yourself, and turn off your video so you can cry or scream, it's OK.

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When you're ready, ask yourself, What will it take for the world to heal from this moment? The foreign woman's faith grew out of desperation. Her persistence changed Jesus' mind. Joseph could weep with his brothers when he accepted his own pain. The South African woman could hug her family's murderer when her own grief and loss were finally heard and acknowledged.

When will we realize how sick we are? When will we seek the help we need the world's wounds to heal? Where will we go for healing? The answer is with you, within you, and all around you. You belong to God, the ultimate healer, however you know and understand God. And we each belong to *each* other. Someday, we *will* worship in person again, eat together, hug. Until then, speak your truth in love; and listen with an open heart. Amen. Thanks be to God.

\* I'm not sure where I first heard this true story. Google it and you will find it in various places.

### Prayers

Generous host, when will we get that all really are welcome at your table? When will we be able to confess our wrongdoing directly to those we have wronged, and humble ourselves to hear their forgiveness? When will we be healed? We trust your goodness to show us, if we are willing. We thank you for leaders in our Session, our Presbytery, and the church worldwide, striving to know and show your will.

All of us are connected through you, through the deep stream of being that holds our souls in life. Help us to welcome our connection, and use it in service to all your children everywhere. Especially we remember those in the path of severe weather, or stranded in war zones, or asking simply for the good things of life we take for granted: in Belarus, in Lebanon, in Palestine and Brazil, in Mauritius, in Hong Kong, in our own rural counties and inner cities.

Be with those who face illness or the threat of illness daily: our frontline workers, our teachers and students, those who care for people who cannot care for themselves. Today, we especially remember respiratory therapists and ICU nurses, and lab techs struggling to keep up with testing. Bless their work of healing, in Jesus' name.