

Is That An Anagnorisis Or Are You Just Happy To See Us Again?

^{NRS} **Genesis 50:15** Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died,¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father." Joseph wept when they spoke to him.¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

When we talk about our lives we often use the word story. When we're getting to know someone we're really interested in, we often share with each other our life's story- and then see if they run.

Like any story we have an idea about where we've come from, who we are- and most of us have lots of ideas about where these stories are headed and how they will turn out.

Now sometimes these stories of ours behave themselves, right? Sometimes they actually go where we want them to go. But most of the time, this isn't how it works, is it? No, most of the time our stories twist and turn, and we just do the best we can to hold on for the ride. And sometimes, if our story really takes a turn we don't like- well we'll do whatever we can to fix it- even things we aren't proud of.

I read a story in the Oregonian about a month ago now. It was just a little story, but it completely captivated me. It was a story about a mental institution just south of Seattle, Western State Hospital. Now, because of how we used to lock people with mental illness up often for life, many of these hospitals had cemeteries attached to them.

Before 1953 a person could literally live their entire adult life at a place like Western State Hospital and then be buried right there on the grounds.

Now I didn't know this, this was interesting to me, but the thing that really blew my mind was this. Partially because of confidentiality laws, but mainly because of the shame people felt about mental illness then and still today I'm afraid- if these graves were marked at all they were marked with a number. A number. That's it. What you see at Western is row after row of small black markers with a number on them. And worse, because of their age a lot of these markers have even been covered over.

The life stories of those people had gone so far off course from the world's hopes and dreams for them, that when they died we actually tried to just forget about them, to almost pretend that they never really existed, and in a way, write them out of our own stories.

And this, this is really what happens in Joseph's story. Now the story of Joseph is the last of the great family stories in Genesis. After the Abraham and Sarah story, we hear about their kids, Isaac and Ishmael. Then after this, we hear about Jacob and Esau, Isaac's kids. And then after this we hear about the fourth generation- we hear about Jacob's twelve sons.

And it isn't a pretty picture is it? Joseph is the last of the 12 brothers to be born. And this means in their world that his job was to keep his head down and to get along with his brothers- eventually Reuben or one of the older brothers would inherit everything from Jacob when he died, and the best thing for everyone would be for the brothers to stick together and know their place.

But Joseph wasn't that kid, was he? No, he was terrible. Rather than accept his position as lowest on the totem pole, Joseph gets down right uppity. First there's that coat of many colors he's always prancing around in. And then he had those dreams. Joseph had these dreams of greatness, and he just loves telling his brothers all about them.

"I had another dream last night, guys," he would say. "Oh yeah, another one?" "Mm, hm. Yeah, I dreamed there were 11 sheaves, eleven older sheaves, and I dreamed that they were bowing down, bowing down with their heads scraping the ground." "Oh yeah," they'd say. "Bowing down before who?" "Before the 12th one," he'd say his eyes flashing. "The youngest, I mean the smallest one."

Well, the brothers weren't having this. In fact they started hating Joseph so badly, they decided to get rid of him. They just wanted bury him so far down they could just forget about him.

And so that's just what they did, isn't it? Good, old fashioned, Biblical family values on display- the brothers pushed him into a pit. And then, when they were figuring out who was going to pull the trigger, they saw some traders coming. And they decided instead of killing him, why not get rid of him and make some money off it, too? And so they sold him to these Ishmaelites heading to Egypt. And then as a piece of poetic justice they took his jacket he loved so much, and they tore it up, and they covered it in animal blood, and then they all went back to father, crying their eyes out with these crocodile tears and a tall tale about their beloved little brother getting eaten by a bear.

Now, it would have been great. They would have gotten rid of that no good, arrogant, punk of a little brother once and for all. It would have been the perfect crime.

Except. Well, except that Joseph winds up in Egypt and, as unlikely as it seems, he turns into basically the right hand man to Pharaoh.

And this would've been fine, except that Jacob and Joseph's brothers wind up in this terrible famine. And they hear stories of Egypt having more food than they know what to do with. And so those brothers wind up heading South into Egypt to see what kind of luck they might have. And of course they run into Joseph whom they no longer recognize, but of course he recognizes them. It's hard to forget people who try to kill you. And after playing some wonderfully awful tricks on them, he finally reveals himself to them and they have this great kumbaya moment. And then Jacob and everyone moves down into Egypt and then this is where Andrew Lloyd Webber cues the music and the story fades out- everyone living happily ever after.

Except this isn't where the story ends in Genesis. The story of Joseph and his brothers does not end on this happy, kumbaya note. It doesn't end with everything being hunky dory. Yeah, they do kind of reconcile here- and the brothers and their father do move down into Egypt. And Joseph gets them some really nice land to live in. But throwing him in that pit- I mean you don't just get over a thing like that, not quickly anyway.

If Joseph did forgive his brothers it didn't last long. After the families all move down into Egypt and Joseph finds them some land, the famine that hit Canaan strikes Egypt, too. And the Israelites living in Egypt didn't do much better than they did in Canaan. And they had to keep going to Joseph for help. And he'd give them some money, and they'd do the best that they could, but then they'd run out. And they'd have

to go back- hat in hand. And this started to become frustrating to Joseph. At first he just gave them money. But after a while he decided they should give him something in return- and so he started taking their livestock from them. But when the famine didn't let up, they started to run out of livestock to sell to Joseph. And so, in Chapter 47 we learn the terrible truth of how Israel came to be slaves in Egypt in the first place. Basically, Joseph was fed up with helping them and after taking all their livestock he told them if they wanted any more money they could become servants of Pharaoh. And they said they didn't care- they just wanted some seed so their little ones wouldn't go hungry.

Joseph, their own brother, sells them into slavery.

And I've read some folks who think Joseph wasn't being mean, he was just doing his job- but I think that's ridiculous. I think Joseph enjoyed watching his brother's on their knees a little bit- I think he enjoyed looking down at them, like they looked down on him in that hole so many years ago. Yeah, I'm not sure what really happened when they appeared to reconcile at first- but I'm pretty sure it wasn't what you'd call forgiveness. Not real, or lasting forgiveness anyway. Pretty much the only thing keeping Joseph from really going after his brothers was their father, Jacob.

So it's no wonder that here at the very beginning of the text we read for this morning- it's no wonder the brothers are so frightened when they begin to think about what's going to happen now that their father is dead. "Realizing their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and is going to pay us back in full for what we did?'"

See, Jacob, their father, he was the only thing really keeping them all together. Jacob was the only link to the past. And when he dies, all the brothers feel kind of lost. The brothers feel lost because they're in a strange country- far from home, far from the Promised land. Joseph feels lost because he never really knew what it was to be home- he just didn't grow up hearing the stories of Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob and being blessed to be a blessing. No, for most of his life he heard stories about Ra, the Sun god, and Isis and Osiris. And Egypt being such a cosmopolitan center- he would have known the Greek myths as well, with Zeus, and Apollo, and Aphrodite, as well as the stories of dozens of other popular faiths as well. No, with Jacob gone, they were adrift- no center to keep them all gathered up, no family story to bind them up. And they're scared. And they should be. It's an anxious moment here. It's a moment where the great story of the Bible, the great story of God working through Abraham and his family, blessing them to be a blessing to the world, where this story almost gets lost.

The amazing thing here is they don't shrink from this moment. In fact they take an enormous risk. They do the hard thing and decide to face their fear and talk with Joseph. And so they arrange a meeting with Joseph and they say the most interesting thing. This is what they say, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."

The most important word here is the word 'your'. *Your* father. *Your* father gave this instruction. And 'please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of *your* father.' The phrase is not only repeated twice, but it literally bookends what they say- coming at

the beginning and the end. And it isn't really what you'd expect them to say either. It's important- but what does it mean?

Now, it's surprising that the brothers don't say 'our Father' here. You would think this would be more persuasive- trying to get him on their side. Like "Hey Joseph, remember we're all just one happy family here, right old buddy?" But they don't. They say 'your father'.

And most commentators hear this as the brothers are being snarky and commanding- like they are going to Joseph and almost ordering him around, telling him to do what daddy says. This is how I hear it. And it's kind of pathetic. I mean Joseph is the one in control here. He's the one with the power. He's the one with the money. But it's who they were. It was worth a shot.

Thing is- even though they weren't trying to be nice. They were just trying to save their own skins- Joseph heard something completely different.

See, the brothers knew Jacob was their father. They grew up with him. They lived with him their whole life. But, because of their terrible crime, Joseph didn't. Joseph never really got to know what kind of a family he was a part of- he never really got to know the story that had been passed down from generation to generation- namely that they weren't just any family. They were different. They were blessed. And they were blessed to be a blessing.

And so here, with Jacob gone, with the only link to the great story dead- the brothers ask for forgiveness- and by saying *your father*, the way they do- well can you imagine how that must have sounded to Joseph?

And this- THIS is why Joseph bursts into tears. Joseph bursts into tears because he suddenly realizes who he is. See, Joseph had everything- he had everything the world; he had money, he had power. But, he didn't have a family story. He didn't know who he was. And when he finds himself back in that story- well it means everything.

There's a word for this. It's anagnorisis. In Greek it literally means knowing again. Anagnorisis is that moment when you suddenly come to yourself, when you suddenly remember who you are, really are- down deep. You know when life has had it's way with you and you kind of know you're not exactly yourself, that you used to have dreams, you used to enjoy things, and that you've kind of fallen into this gray place where you've kind of lost your way, anagnorisis is the moment when you remember, and when you recover. It's what happens to the Prodigal son out there when he realizes he has to go back home. It's what happens to Paul when he was blinded by Christ and he realized he had to stop persecuting the church.

And it's what happens to us sometimes, too, when we hear and read these stories. I think that's why we read the Bible. As we've embarked on this year long project of reading through the Bible together, I've actually wondered sometimes why we still read the sucker. I know a pastor isn't supposed to think things like that- but I have. I mean the world views in it are crazy. None of us think humans are actually made from dirt and God-breath. None of us believe if we really think about it that heaven is above the sky- space is above the sky, the moon, the stars. And sometimes the language of it just drives me crazy. Take the word righteous. This is supposed to be a good word- something I

should aspire too. Well I hate the word righteous. I do. I just hate the sound of it.

Sometimes I think why do we keep reading the thing?

Well, we read it because every once in a while, every once in a while, we will find ourselves in it. We will hear about a person and identify with them. We will hear a word and just be struck by it- comforted, challenged, lifted up, or maybe all three. Every now and again, if we give ourselves to it, we will find that one of these old, old stories is really is our story, too. And when this happens we find like Joseph did that day- that this is your family, too.

And it's why Laurel Lemke started a group that has been researching the graves up there at Western State Hospital and raising money to literally write hundreds and hundreds of people back into the stories of their own families as well as the story of our community. To date Laurel Lemke and her organization have restored 660 graves- placing the name and the dates of the person's life above where they lie. And yeah, maybe their stories didn't turn out the way they would have liked, the way their families would have liked. But their stories, their lives still had purpose, meaning, and dignity- for like Joseph, and like you, Jacob was their father, too. **Amen.**