

Sermon
28 October 2018
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Genesis 45:1-18

I would like to start today's sermon with a wee reflection (taken from *Spill the Beans*):

It got messy, Joseph. Guise and disguise. Control and abandonment. Revelation and recognition. Shock and silence. Forgiveness and tears.

It gets messy in every family. Siblings at odds. Casting up and casting out. Betrayal and separation. Grudges and guilt. Yearning for might-have-been.

It gets messy in God's kingdom. Upside down and inside out. First is last and last is first. Smelly feet need washed. Dirty people need a hug. And nails rip innocent flesh.

Let's get messy for God's sake. Digging the dirt for diamonds. Hauling in lost sheep. Toiling over weeds and seeds. And opening our arms to our brothers and sisters.

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Opening our arms to our brothers and sisters... Exactly what Joseph did in our Scripture reading today.

But reconciling with estranged family members is something most of us are not very good at.

A friend of mine has a 5 year old son and a 4 year old daughter. They live on a farm. After one of those rainy weeks, when the sun seems to have disappeared completely, the kids got fed-up playing in the house, so they put on their raincoats and wellies and had great fun jumping in all the muddy puddles outside.

They ventured quite far from the house, and then the wee boy maybe got a little too excited about this game, and he got stuck in the mud. His boots were so deep in the mud that he couldn't move. After unsuccessfully trying to pull him out, his sister said that she would walk home to get help...

The wee boy patiently waited on his sister to return with a grown-up. After standing there in the rain, unable to move, for what felt like almost an hour, he decided to just pull his feet out of his boots and walk home barefoot.

Where he discovered his sister happily watching telly!! She forgot all about him...

He was so angry at her that he declared he would never ever speak to her again; which of course was a promise he could only keep until he wanted someone to play with a little later!!

I'm sure all of you have stories to tell about things your siblings or friends did to you that made you super angry, but looking back at it, you can now laugh about it together.

But sometimes people do things to us that hurt us so deeply, that we truly feel we'll never be able to put it behind us...

Like what happened this this guy – Joseph.

He had 10 older brothers. That in itself must have been hard! But he had a good self-esteem, probably a survival strategy if you ask me, and like only wee brothers can – he annoyed his big brothers big time!

Things went too far, and his brothers decided to get rid of him. Some of them were even happy to kill him, but then they agreed to sell him as a slave.

He was taken from his homeland, Canaan, to a foreign country – Egypt.

And to put it simply – his life must have been very miserable. But he was just one of those people who always saw the glass as half full.

So in Egypt his life had ups and downs too. He got used to living there, he was respected. Then he ended up in prison by no fault of his own. But then, when eventually he got out, his life changed completely – as he then played a very important role in the Egyptian palace.

This of course is a very simple summary of a life that was really really hard.

Can you imagine what it must have been like for Joseph? He was young. Part of a big family. And now all of a sudden, he was alone, in a land where they spoke a different language and had different customs.

And all this because his brothers didn't like him, because they were jealous of him.

So very easily, over the years, a deep hatred towards his brothers could have formed in his heart. And I am pretty sure he *did* hate his brothers at times.

But as the years went by and he looked back at his life, he realised that although they hurt him deeply, to see his father again was more important to him than getting back at his brothers.

So he forgave them.

At first they couldn't believe it. Would any of them been able to do the same if the roles were reversed? But Joseph knew that the guilt about what they have done to him was more than enough punishment for their deeds.

Life is short. Grudges, hatred and revenge are just not worth it.

So his "glass-half-full" attitude made him accomplish things that are almost unbelievable.

Where did he get the strength to do the things he did all through his life, and especially to forgive his brothers?

It's because he had faith. He truly believed that God was with him all the time.

And he told his brothers that actually, looking back on his life, he can now see that God used what they did to him for the greater good, because of where he was now and what he's accomplished, he could now save his own family.

This scene reminds me a little of those stories on telly when long lost family members find each other after spending many years apart, and tearfully embrace each other, no matter what the reason for their separation was.

The reality is that if Joseph decided to hold a grudge against his brothers, he wouldn't have been able to see his dad again.

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The theology behind this story is quite difficult to understand. Did God plan for Joseph to be sold into slavery, or to be put into prison?

Personally, I don't think God ever plans for bad things to happen to his children. But he can *use* people's wrong choices for the greater good.

God can bring order out of the chaos we create.

The easiest way for me to explain this, is by making use of a metaphor:

Everything we do and everything that happens to us, can be seen as threads woven into a tapestry.

All the tears and pain and suffering and sorrow Joseph's brothers brought upon him made his tapestry dark (*like the back side of a tapestry*), but without them knowing it, God took what they wove and made it into a blessing (*like the front side of the same tapestry*). A blessing not only for Joseph, but for all of them and all humankind too!

And the same is true for us! God knows how to turn the mistakes we make, or the wrongs other people do to us, around.

God knows how to use the very threads of hurt that is sown into our tapestry, and he can turn it into something absolutely beautiful.

He did that for Joseph, and he does that for all of us too.

So let's reconcile. Let's embrace. Let's care. Let's love.

Because nothing anybody ever does to us here on earth, can hurt more than those nails driven through Jesus' hands on the cross.

Let's focus on *him* when we feel as if we are dying inside...

Please remember: loathing and hating those who hurt us, will only hurt us more. It's in forgiving others, that we become whole.

CS Lewis, one of my favourite authors, said a very wise thing: “You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.”

By the grace of God, let’s all do that.

You can’t go back and change the beginning, but you can start where you are and change the ending.

Amen