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The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: Joseph the Merciful: “They Don’t Deserve It”

Genesis 37:11-36 (selected verses); Genesis 50:15-21

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In our sermons through the spring and summer we are looking at the lives of various people whose stories are told in the pages of scripture. These are people who are our ancestors by faith. Just as we are shaped, whether we want to be or not, by our flesh and blood families (or by those who adopted us) – by their examples, by the stories that are told of parents and grandparents and aunts and uncles – so all of these people in Scripture, members of our spiritual family, have been given to us in order to influence and shape who we are; to give to us our identity. They are our ancestors by faith.

Think, for example, of the central story in the pages of scripture: the story of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ. He calls us his family in Mark 3:32-34, and he is the one whose life in particular, above all others, is to shape our identity: both who we are, and who we are to become.

To put it another way, the scripture is not just a book of theology – though it is. It is not just a book of hymns and prayers – though in the Book of Psalms, it is precisely that. It is not just a book of history, the story of ancient Israel – though history is important and is intimately connected to “family”: the Scripture contains our family history. In addition, and not accidentally, the Scripture is repeatedly a book that is filled of the stories of the lives of people. These lives have been given to us by God on purpose, just as Jesus’s life has been given to us, and through their lives too (our relatives by faith), our sense of who we are, our identity, our character, is to be shaped. Sometimes it’s the positive in their lives, to be emulated. Sometimes it’s the negative, to be avoided. But we belong to them within the family of God.

So in our sermons we are thinking about our ancestors by faith and today I want us to focus on one whose name is Joseph. This is not the husband of Mary the mother of Jesus. This is a Joseph mentioned in Genesis, the first book in the Bible, a man who lived between 1600-1800 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the son of Jacob whose life we’ve been looking at over the past two weeks. Jacob had 12 sons and Joseph is the 2nd youngest of these sons; and he was his father’s favorite son – and that’s problematic in and of itself.

Just as Jacob was the favorite son of his mother, a favoritism that led to trouble in Jacob’s youth (Genesis 25:28), so this favoritism is going to lead to trouble as well. Joseph is the favorite son of his father, and he knew it as he spoke to his brothers, his older brothers. He would tell tales on his brothers to his father (Gen.37:2) and he would also tell them about dreams that he

had, dreams that came from God – about how, one day, he would be greater than they. The dreams in time would come true, but there's no question that Joseph would have shared the dreams with no tact, and with no small amount of glee, knowing the protection of his father and that he could get away with it.

So his brothers found him to be obnoxious. They grew in their anger against him. Their anger turned to hatred and they did with their brother Joseph what many brothers and sisters have wanted to do with their siblings, but have never actually done: they sold their brother into slavery (Gen.37:12-36)! And then they began to lie about it to their father, just as their father Jacob had lied to his father (Gen.27:30-38). So the sin was repeated from generation to generation – they lied to their father. They carried out their horrific act one day when they were far away from their father; finding good pasture for his sheep. Jacob sent Joseph to check on them, and they seized the opportunity to give full vent to their anger (echoes of Cain and Abel, Gen.4:1-16). Once the deed was done, they returned home bringing with them Joseph's jacket, covered in blood, suggesting to their father that it belonged to Joseph. Jacob recognized the coat as a gift he'd given to Joseph, and began to assume that Joseph was dead, killed by wild animals, and this garment was all that was left (Gen.37:31-35). And while the brothers tried to comfort Jacob, they did not disabuse him of the story that they'd made up about his favorite son.

So these brothers placed their father in this awful unresolvable state of grief, an awful pit of despair and sorrow. And they leave their brother Joseph to the unknown, but almost certainly horrifying consequences of slavery. For Joseph, though, while life is not good, it's also not as bad as it might have been. He ends up in Egypt, with the best master possible. To be sure, Joseph has lost much: his freedom, his rights, his privileges, and he's far from home with no hope of returning; but his master, a man called Potiphar, treats him well and sees that Joseph has gifts and talents that he can use. Indeed, what Potiphar discovers is that whenever Joseph is given a task, things seem to go well. So Potiphar begins to give Joseph more and more responsibility, until he places Joseph in charge of his whole household. Instead of languishing and doing nothing, menial tasks, Joseph is using his mind, developing his skills even as a slave (Gen.39:1-6).

Everything seems to be going as well as it could possibly go within a bad situation, until Potiphar's wife makes an accusation against Joseph which is simply not true. Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of making advances towards her – trying to have an affair with her (Gen.39:6b-20). There is nobody there as another witness. It's just one on one – her word against his; and he, the foreign slave is never going to be believed. Even if Potiphar feels that there's something not quite right about the accusation and that Joseph may be innocent, he cannot defend Joseph against his wife.

So Joseph ends up in prison (Gen.39:20-40:14). He's now not only a slave but a prisoner, and he could have easily languished there in prison, just as he could have languished in Potiphar's house; but he chooses not to do so. He could have grown bitter. He could have grown angry. He could have lost all hope. But what we read in the story is that none of this happened to him.

Instead he picked himself up where he was and made the most of the situation, and as he had done in Potiphar's house, he set to work, completing tasks, building relationships, working with people, until the chief jailer noticed him and began to put him in charge of the other prisoners.

Indeed, Joseph was placed in charge of all the other prisoners in the jail, and of two new prisoners in particular who came his way. These two prisoners had previously been working for the King of Egypt. They were royal officials. One was the cup bearer: really the chief body guard, preserving the King from any danger, drinking the cup of wine to ensure it was not poisoned before it came to the King. He was thrown into jail, we don't know why but he's thrown into jail, along with the baker, the head cook for all the king's household (for bad cooking??!).

We are not told what these two royal officials have done, but they end up in prison, and Joseph is in charge of them, and he notices them and cares for them, which is remarkable in and of itself. He could have been consumed with his own problems, saying to himself, "I've got enough problems of my own!" But instead, one day he notices that their demeanor is different and he asks them about this. And they said to him, "Well, quite independently of each other, but on the same night, we've had dreams, two different dreams – and they seem to mean something, but there is no one to interpret them." And Joseph (the one who had had "dreams-with-meaning" earlier in his life) almost casually says to them that God knows how to interpret their dreams, and asks them to share their dreams with him. So they relate their dreams to Joseph who then gives them a clear sense of what those dreams might mean – and in a short period of time his interpretations come true.

He said to the cup bearer: in three days you're going to be released. You're going to go back to your job. And all will be well. You will work for the King again. But he said to the baker: not so good for you. In three days you're going to be put to death. Your life is going to come to an end. And it happened. The interpretation of the dreams came true.

Joseph had this gift from God, and he was able to use that gift; even as a slave and prisoner he was able and willing to share that gift . . . and with the sharing of that gift arose the hope that he might be set free: if only the cup bearer who now was restored to the King would remember Joseph, saying a word in Joseph's favor to his friends "in high places," then perhaps Joseph might be released from the jail.

Joseph asked the cup bearer to remember him; but it didn't happen. Out of jail, the cup bearer, alive and busy with all his restored responsibilities, promptly forgot this awful experience of jail, and forgot, too, how Joseph had helped him. For two more years Joseph remained in jail, with nobody on the outside remembering who he was or where he was. The sense of isolation must have been almost unbearable, as if God himself had forgotten him . . . until the King himself began to have dreams which seemed to have significance or meaning (Gen. 41:1-36). These dreams were like Joseph's youthful dreams, or the dreams of the royal officials; they were like parables, requiring interpretation. And the king sought that interpretation from his own advisers. And it was only when they were unable to respond with any satisfactory meaning, that

the cup bearer remembered this man called Joseph, still in the jail, the one who had interpreted his own dream for him. So he told his story to the King, and Joseph was immediately summoned from the jail to stand before the King of Egypt – the most powerful man in the world at that time – to see if he could understand the dreams that the King had had.

The first dream was about two sets of seven cows: seven who were ugly and seven who were fat and beautiful. And the second dream was about grains of corn: seven stalks that were straight and full, and seven that were bending over and clearly blighted. When the King asked Joseph to share the meaning, Joseph responded to the King in a way that was self-deprecating: while he, Joseph, was unable to understand dreams, his God was fully able to do so, and that the meaning was clear . . . he said:

The seven fat cows and the seven full ears of grain represent seven years of plenty which lie ahead of us right now. And the ugly, bending, thin grain and the thin and ugly cows, represented seven years of famine that would be following the seven years of plenty. Then Joseph added his own commentary: that unless the king did something immediately as a response that his people would starve. Plans had to be made soon for the years ahead.

And the King turned to Joseph and said that if anybody was sharp enough to plan for the upcoming future, then that person was surely Joseph. So right there and then, the king releases Joseph from jail and slavery, and elevates him to be his Prime Minister, the person who develops the strategy to save the nation from the coming famine.

This is a swift and massive transition for Joseph. After so many years, thirteen years, in which Joseph had experienced abuse, a false accusation, slavery, and imprisonment, all of a sudden he's now raised up from this powerlessness into this position of great power. And he uses the power well. He establishes the framework within which grain is going to be collected in the seven years of plenty and enough food, more than enough food is going to be collected not only for the land of Egypt but for other people as well, so it overflows from the land of Egypt to others, when famine strikes them too, as it did. Indeed when famine came to the land of Canaan where Jacob, Joseph's father lived, news of the abundance in Egypt had already reached him, and he immediately sent ten of his sons, Joseph's brothers down to Egypt to buy food (down to their brother Joseph though they know nothing about whether Joseph is alive or not and Jacob believes that Joseph is dead). All but the youngest brother, Benjamin, are sent down to Egypt to buy grain from the Egyptians.

When they arrive they meet the man who has developed this "disaster assistance plan" face-to-face (Gen.42-45). They clearly don't recognize Joseph (quite naturally: they believe him to be a slave, or worse, dead; and besides, he had been a boy of 17 when they last had seen him and now he was 30) – but he recognizes them. He does not tell them who he is until he has established from them that they have changed their ways, that they love their father and they love

their younger brother Benjamin and it's only when they return the second time that he reveals to them who he is.

They are, of course absolutely stunned. How inconceivable to think that the brother they had sold into slavery was now the second most powerful person in the nation of Egypt. They are stunned, but there is no doubt in their minds that this is in fact their brother Joseph.

On one occasion before he tells them who he is he places them at a dining room table in their birth order and they look around and they say how is it possible that this has happened (Gen.43:33)? Later, they would realize that he has known them all along. In addition, it must have been a daunting moment when they came to realize that the dream that Joseph had shared with them when he had been an obnoxious young child was coming true before their eyes – that they were bowing down to him and he was lording it over them, and had the legitimate authority to do so.

There was no doubt that he was Joseph. But there was also no doubt that they were afraid of this one who was still alive. He had power to bless them; but he also had the power to crush them. He wouldn't do anything to harm them while their father was alive, they were sure of that. He would do nothing to hurt their father. But when their father was dead how easily, they feared, Joseph could return evil for evil. How easily he could do to them what they had done to him. How easily he could have turned to them and said *"You do not deserve one wit of mercy. You just don't deserve it. You don't deserve the food and you don't deserve my forgiveness. After all you have done to me!"* How easily he could have turned on them like that. Indeed, when Jacob dies (Gen.49:33), their fear becomes explicit, and comprises almost the final word of first book of the Bible (Genesis 50:15-21):

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?" So they approached Joseph saying "Your father gave us instruction before he died," [DR: did Jacob really say this? Or were they making this up in their fear, to get as much authority behind their words as they could]. "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. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him and said we are here as your slaves. But Joseph said to them: ***"Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? 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. So have no fear. I myself will provide for you and for your little ones."*** And in this way he reassured them speaking kindly to them.

The story of Joseph is a story about the sovereign faithfulness of God. There is no question about that/ The God we believe in is the God of history who knows the end of things from the

beginning and the beginning of things from the end. And for us who are wandering, seemingly aimlessly at times, through the middle of life, how critical it is that we remember that God knows where we are going and that he is a God who directs our paths. The God of the Scripture is not just a God who stands above the sphere of history but who enters history and directs its course, the course of human lives, ordinary lives like yours and mine. And he calls us to know this and to believe in this sovereign care and in this sovereign love.

This matter of God's sovereign faithfulness is integral to the story of Joseph. But so too are the themes of power and of powerlessness: power and of powerlessness.

How are we going to handle *powerlessness* when it strikes us? – and at some time in our lives it will, even if we are people of power. At some time in our lives we will begin to know powerlessness: times when we cannot get our own way, when we do everything we can and it simply doesn't work; times when we've been cheated or backstabbed unfairly, or overlooked and forgotten by those who should have noticed us but didn't; forgotten, or so we feel, even by God. How are we going to handle it when we find ourselves in a place of powerlessness like that?

- Are we going to descend to the level of bitterness and self-pity, to the level of cynicism and negativity that so many people descend to? And then they take their unhappiness and they begin to dump it on other people's lives to bring them down to their same level: are we going to descend and spiral down like that?
- Or are we going to rise up like Joseph, who rose up again and again; who would not let his demeanor and actions be determined by the situation in which he found himself, but trusting in the sovereign guidance and will of God did whatever he could wherever he was to be the person God wanted him to be?

Some of you may know or remember the writings of Victor Frankl, the psychiatrist who suffered in a concentration camp in Germany in World War II and who said there were different kinds of people in the camp: some who succumbed to their circumstances (and I often think that I probably would have been among them); and then others who didn't, but who rose above those circumstances and with enormous dignity found meaning wherever they were. And they he said more often than not were those who survived.

What a calling this is that we have as those who have the power of God and believe that God can care for us no matter how far down we go – no matter where we've been sold into, and God help us deal with those times of powerlessness within our lives that will come our way at some time or another.

But the story is not just about powerlessness it's about power as well.

How are we going to handle *power* when it comes to us as well? Some of us may say, "Well, I have no power. Other people have power but I don't." But the truth is that simply because we live in this nation, this wealthy nation, we all are powerful. Every single one of us wields more

power than most people in this world, no matter who we are, or whether it looks like it or not. How are we going to wield our power?

- Are we going to use our power to withhold blessing on others? Or to share it with others? To give and to be generous, or to hold back, because it's in our power to do so? To forgive others or to maintain a grudge against others, because that too is within our power.

We can use power in all kinds of different ways, and the story of Joseph is one that reminds us that that is true.

- Sometimes in mis-using power, it's not that we choose deliberately to abuse it. The story of the cup bearer's poor memory is an important one in this regard. This man is in a powerful position, working for the King, and he simply forgets to do good to the one whom he could have remembered. Are there not many people in our world whom God has called us to remember and not forget?

But how are we to remember? To which I would respond by saying that my memory, too, is poor; the only way I can remember is if friends like you remind me . . . and (in the same way) if I remind you! Together we can do, and remember to do, what we cannot do by ourselves – to notice others who are forgotten so that our power is used together on behalf of others.

But whether it's in powerlessness or in power, Joseph comes to us as our brother in the faith as our ancestor in the faith, and he stands for us as a challenge as we determine who we are going to be, what our identity is going to be, what character we are going to have: *How will we use our power and our powerlessness as those who like Joseph believe in the gracious hand of God who though people may mean harm to us will override that harm for good?*

Friends, each of us has been given grace by God. God could easily say to us in his power “You don't deserve one wit of it, look how you've treated me and my Son!” But the good news of the gospel is that God chooses not to use his power like that, but to say to us, to you and me, “I love you anyway! Not grudgingly, but deeply, truly, with a love that will never let you go. You live within my grace always. Be the people who are brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ, and of Joseph: people who share that grace with others whether in powerlessness or in power.”

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