

GENESIS 45: 3-15

I'm always amazed by scripture: and even more amazed when people think that the Bible somehow isn't real....that it's only for people who are a little naive, or hypocritical, or just not living in the real world.

This is as real as it gets. I don't know about you, but this story speaks to my guts. Deeper than I'd like, if you want to know the truth. As surely as the story from Matthew we read at the beginning. If this isn't a stormy passage that cuts to the quick -

It's about betrayal. And abuse.

It's about feeling rejected by your family – not accepted by your brothers and sisters. About family favourites, and how much pain can be caused when a parent has a favourite.

It's about a little kid being treated cruelly by older people in the family

It's about more than anything in our life, wanting the approval of your dad – and about the way a family can deal with, and maybe overcome, old hurts that are real and deep.

It doesn't get any more real than this. Bible study is not for the faint of heart. It forces you to look at yourself....as in a mirror. One that shows all the flaws and scars....and still says you're beautiful.

Is there a part of your own heart in this story?

It started when they were kids. Joseph was the second youngest. He and Benjamin, the baby, were the only two whose mom had been Rachael – their father's favourite. Whether or not that had anything to do with it I don't know, but honestly it must have been hard. Their dad Jacob had four wives (well, two were concubines) It was accepted practice at the time, but still, the Bible is very clear, it led to jealousy and was not the happy harmonious home life that some even today would have us believe.

In any case....there were 12 boys, and one girl in the family, and Joseph was the favourite. He knew it, too. Acted like a little brat because he knew he could get away with it. Just for example, one morning he came to breakfast saying “I had a dream last night”

Little Benjie, who didn't know any better, said “What was your dream, Joey?”

“It was really great” he said, taking the last piece of toast without asking.... “all of you had sheaves of wheat, and so did I, but your wheat all bowed down to mine. What do you think it means, Dad?”

They couldn't stand it. They couldn't stand him.

That coat – that was the final straw. It had long sleeves....a coat for someone who didn't have to work. A gift. “To Joseph, from Dad”. None of them had ever – EVER – received a present from him at all. With 13 kids things are passed down and there's no money for extravagant gifts....but the day Jacob presented him with that coat...something snapped.

This went WAY beyond teasing or name calling or beating up. They did all of that and more. First they were going to kill him.....then just leave him to die....but then they found a way to make some money out of the deal. So they sold him, as a slave. Took that coat home, ripped and full of blood, and let their father draw the obvious conclusion. A wild animal must have got him.

Those of you who are parents can imagine what that must have been like for Jacob....

Well – Joseph was taken to Egypt, as a slave.

He was young -

Dragged away from his family to a new country -

He had to learn a new language, and fast.

There were years of hard labour, more beatings, a false accusation and a jail term.

But the worst part wasn't all that. It was the homesickness, and the sickening memories of what his brothers had done to him. Sometimes, he'd just block it out of his mind in the daytime, so he could function, you know? But then – he'd wake up sweating and screaming at night – he couldn't keep it out of his dreams.

He got real good at dreams.

And used that to work his way to the top.

He did it too! Got to be the second in command to the King – to Pharaoh.

That was something! Starting out as a child slave and then – head of a foreign country?

Not bad at all!

He was a success. An achiever. It hadn't been easy, - the only foreigner in the Egyptian court – and Pharaoh thought he was wonderful. There were others, though, who were jealous and resentful. It felt – familiar.

That happens, doesn't it? You get yourself right back into the same pattern – same relationship dynamics. He hadn't dealt with it, and so he repeated it.

His life depended on being strong, and one jump ahead of everyone else. No time for thinking, no time for remembering, (well, except for those pesky nightmares, and the beginning of an ulcer, he was fine. He was just fine) He was strong. He was in control. He didn't need anyone. No time for all this “feeling” stuff. He was...fine.

Who knows how long it would have gone along like that....but then – who would ever have thought....one day there they were. His brothers! Something about a famine, and did Egypt have any food they could buy...he hardly heard what they were saying – there they were! It was surreal – there was Simeon, Judah, Levi – and could that be Gad? The last time he'd seen them had beenwell....you know.

And all of a sudden....feelings! Feelings came rushing from everywhere! Anger. Blind rage. And then....inexplicably...excitement, and then confusion, and then wanting to hug them, and then anger again....and for the first time in years.....tears were streaming down his face and he couldn't stop them. And they didn't even know who he was!

He ordered everyone out of the room.

Turned to them....

There was no easy way...just out with it. He took off his head gear and outer fancy robe, he was trembling and could hardly get his arms out of the heavy embroidered sleeves...

“I'm Joseph. I'm your brother. It's true. Is father still alive?”

Well! Their eyes got big, then, they dropped to the ground, terrified. Only Judah managed to raise his head enough to nod yes to the question about their dad.

And then – a most revealing comment.

(There are lines from the bible that sometimes you can overlook, but that just in a few words can take your heart and twist it...this is one of those lines.)

“Go back, and tell him that I'm ruler of Egypt.”

Tell dad I'm somebody.

He wanted his father to know that he did good.

How many people, achievers, ambitious, driven people, rise to the top and would trade it all for the approval of their dad. Or mom.

How many of us would give a great deal to have our parents know and acknowledge that we “did good”?

Again the tears. He was angry, - furiously angry -and yet, he wanted desperately to be their brother. To be loved, accepted, part of them.

And so....

He pretended it was all ok.

People who have been hurt often do that.

“It's all ok” he said - “It was part of God's plan”

Sometimes, people, in trying to cope with horrible things that happen, say to themselves or to others, “It was God's plan – some day we'll understand”.

God CAN bring good things out of the worst circumstances, that's true.
But that is NOT THE SAME THING as saying God caused it to happen.

God did not make Jacob choose Joseph as his favourite.
God did not make those brothers abuse him and sell him.

You cannot excuse yourself or someone else by saying it was all part of God's plan. And you do not rid yourself of years of fear and anger by saying that. It's not true, and it doesn't work.

Here's what I think happened. Or maybe it's what I hope happened.
It says “the brothers talked to him” I bet they did.

It took a lot of mixed up, going back and forth in every way (read the whole account) before the family was truly back together. There were tears, accusations, game playing, and confession.

Here's what I hope:

I hope that Jacob confessed his mistake in having made Joseph his favourite. He told them how, when Rachel died, something in him died too; how it had broken him. And that Joseph reminded him of her, and he had been clinging to her memory through her son. They had never heard their father talk like that before.

And told each child that he loved them and was proud of the men and woman they had become. He didn't realize he had never said that out loud to his children before and how important those spoken words really are.

And Joseph confessed how he had loved all the attention, had played off this brothers against their father, and how he had enjoyed their jealousy.....he also told them how lonely he felt back then, how he wanted so much to be asked to join in a game, to share a joke, and how it felt to be left out. The perfect one. Daddy's little man.
He told them some of the pain, some of the horrors of having been sold, and his struggle to put it all behind him, to make something of himself.

And each brother confessed what it felt like knowing their father loved someone else more. And asked forgiveness for the final, horrible act of violence against him.

Dinah, for her part, found her own voice, and, hearing her brothers speak honestly for

the first time in their lives, found the strength to speak about her own experiences of pain and abuse, not because she had been the favourite, but simply because she was a girl, of no consequence in this male world.

One by one they asked forgiveness from each other and from God. More tears. Some laughter too, finally, as they saw one another now as the fragile, lonely people they were; who needed more than anything the care and love that only they could give each other.

THIS was the will of God.
THIS was the hand of God bringing life out of death.

We are not Joseph. We are not Jacob or one of the 12 sons or Dinah the daughter.
We have not literally been sold by our brothers.

But each of us had parents.
Some of us have brothers and sisters.
We know what it is to want more than anything the love of a parent or someone else who is simply incapable of giving it.

We know what it is to feel betrayed – sold out – by someone close. People we thought were family or friends.

Some of us know physical or mental abuse. Some of us are parents who can make or break a child by favouritism, or whose own heart has been broken by the loss of a child.

This is real, human, deep material.

I mostly let it speak for itself....except for a call to what is truly God's will in the midst of complicated family relationships.

**ABUSE IS WRONG.
IT IS NEVER GOD'S WILL.
IT IS SIN, AND NEEDS TO BE NAMED AS SUCH.**

What Joseph's brothers did to him was wrong. It had to be talked about; confessed; acknowledged as wrong.

Forgiveness is never easy. It seldom happens quickly, and often in stages. The heart seems to have its own timing.

Humanly speaking, our best route to it is through honesty,

Coming to see one another as real human beings, flawed, broken, beautiful.

Finally it is a gift from God, whose will is healthy, life-giving relationships among us.

May God bless us all as we pursue them.

Amen!