

**Sermon: August 20, 2023. Genesis 45: 1-15**  
**Ralph Connor Memorial United Church - Rev Greg Wooley**

There is a LOT going on in the story of Joseph, everything you've just heard and more. It's a bit of a page-turner, including some naughty sections, and the Bible did not skimp on the space allotted: it stretches from Genesis 37 to 50.

Last Sunday, we left Joseph dumped into an empty cistern then sold into slavery, and I promised something more upbeat this week, because this is the week where we meet up with God's reconciling love, a grace-infused love beyond our ability to enact or comprehend.

I need to say up-front, that from a human standpoint, the work of reconciliation is hard. There is good reason why Canada and Ireland and South Africa and at least fifty other nations have some form of Truth and Reconciliation processes to deal with egregious forms of brokenness. Nothing I'm going to say this morning is intended to soften, simplify or sugar-coat the difficult, complex work of these formal processes of justice-based reconciliation. I also know that for some folks, enforced family estrangements have been needed in order to maintain personal health and safety, and I have no intention to pile on to that.

Hard as it is, reconciliation is at the heart of our Judaeo-Christian tradition and expresses the heart of God. And what is it, to reconcile? Rather than just going with my gut on this, it was time to consult a dictionary, so I checked out a few and bring forward this four-fold definition: To reconcile is

1. to settle or resolve, to restore to friendship or harmony after a time of opposition or estrangement.
2. to make consistent or congruous, or to adjust the way you think about a fact or situation that is opposed to another fact or situation so that you can accept both
3. to accept a situation, even if it is unpleasant or painful, because it cannot be changed; to resign oneself to it.
4. (In accounting,) to reconcile is to compare different financial accounts, amounts, etc. in order to check that they add up to the same total or to explain any differences between them

Using these definitions as our structure, and the story of Joseph as our workbench, what might we learn about reconciliation?

- 1. To reconcile is to settle or resolve, to restore to friendship or harmony after a time of opposition or estrangement.**

Try, for a moment, to imagine Joseph and his brothers when he revealed to them his identity. From Joseph's standpoint, there would be the long-standing simmer directed against those who treated him with such cruel jealousy, and a deep yearning to know if his father was still alive, and what kind of adult his baby brother Benjamin had grown into, and so much more. Joseph's emotional spectrum would be full: trauma, bitterness, elation, you name it.

From the brothers' standpoint, this unexpected reunion with their father's favourite son would be like a connection beyond the grave. As far as they knew, the "Joseph" part of their story ended when the traders took him away... and yet, what they had done to Joseph must have been excellent fodder for recurring nightmares. The sole reason they were in Egypt was to get wheat in a time of widespread famine; their brother Joseph wouldn't have come to mind, so when he reveals himself to them, we can imagine them picking their jaws up off the ground.

Aside from the bits of trickery involved in the story – framing Benjamin by tucking an expensive goblet into his saddlebag – I am so struck by the graciousness here, the gracious core of the heart of God. The brothers expected punishment for what they had done to Joseph, with

retributive justice suggesting that Joseph would have been within his rights to sell them as slaves to travelling traders from afar, but Joseph forgives them – the first instance, it turns out, of human-to-human reconciliation in the story of our forebears in faith.

It's hard to over-emphasize what an extraordinary, God-given gift it is, to witness the reconciliation described in today's scripture reading. Yes, Joseph does something wonderful here but he is so clear, these are the actions of God. The things we do to love others, are embodiments of God's love; the choice in favour of restorative justice over retributive justice, mirrors God's deep willingness to have a loving relationship with humanity, even when we behave horribly; the things we do, the choices we make to forgive others and be reconciled to them, are powered and informed by God's own reconciling grace. Praise be to God!

- 2. To reconcile is to make consistent or congruous, or to adjust the way you think about a fact or situation that is opposed to another fact or situation so that you can accept both.**

**And 3. To reconcile yourself to a situation is to accept it even if it is unpleasant or painful, because it cannot be changed; to resign oneself to it.**

These two I put together, because the story of Joseph kind of rests on both. I can't see a way to recap the story of Joseph and his brothers, that doesn't show the brothers entirely in the wrong and Joseph playing the role of the wronged party. Yes, it would have been wise if Jacob had just held on to that stupid coat of many colours rather than giving it to his favourite son, and yes, it would have been prudent for Joseph to keep his mouth shut about the dreams that placed him in the middle of wheat sheaves bowing down to him - though we can see that this pretty much comes true when the famine-struck brothers come to Joseph in Egypt, seeking the wheat he had set aside – but no matter how much we can understand the jealousy toward Joseph, nothing – NOTHING – justifies their actions of casting him into a pit, and selling him into slavery.

Yet Joseph needed to step past the 100% reality that he had been wronged, in order to make things move. To be reconciled to his brothers, he needed to find a new way to view this; he needed to value restoration of relationship, as being more valuable than payback. He needed to step back from the satisfaction of making his brothers PAY for what they did. This isn't the kind of re-think that we humans easily do, at least not on our own.

We also note that reconciliation, on its own, is not a magic cure for all that ails us. Not all of the things that "came next" for this family and nation were positive: according to the Bible account, this was the beginnings of the Hebrew people in Egypt, in which they became both populous and oppressed. That is something to be reconciled, as we consider this story.

- 4. In accounting, to reconcile is to compare different financial accounts, amounts, etc. in order to check that they add up to the same total or to explain any differences between them**

It might seem that this part of the definition I could just skip over in the sermon, but I won't, and I'm going to tell you why.

It is so easy to slip into a relationship with God that has an aspect of bookkeeping to it: I do something good, God keeps track, I get rewarded; I mess up, God keeps track, I get punished. I call this the Santa Claus God: the God who "knows if we've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake". Or, especially in challenging or chaotic times, one can slip into a different kind of bargaining: I pray for the things I want to see happen in life, and so long as I fit a certain standard of Christian behaviour, or decry those who aren't meeting said standard, I can fully expect God to comply, as if God is to be held to a certain level of customer satisfaction.

In the story of Joseph, though, we see the opposite of this: we see God's desire, not for reward and punishment as deserved, but for unmerited grace that goes far beyond anything we could reasonably expect. Joseph's brothers were scoundrels in the way they treated their brother, yet his desire – and God's – were for a new, unified path forward. God had bigger things in mind for this family, way more valuable than sliding into retributive justice (which is, of course, another model of living by the ledger). In Christ, this same grace is at work, calling us away from brokenness, back into relationship with one another, with the earth, with our loving God.

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In the story of Joseph, especially the way that his life's story resolves in Egypt, we see the actions of God, the author of reconciliation. While our lives are less dramatic than this ancient and archetypal story, we too acknowledge that behind and within our best actions is the unshakeable presence of a loving God. When we open ourselves to that Divine presence we meet (as did our forebears in faith) a God who engages with us, wrestles with us, a God who is with us in our times of solitude and in times when we strive to be reconciled with those from whom we'd been estranged – or when we seek to be reconciled with a life path we had abandoned. In the story of Joseph, in all his ups and downs, and in our lives, with all our twists and turns, we see our loving God at work. May these words speak into your life, in ways familiar, and ways yet to be discovered. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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