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Eastminster Worship Services

Sunday, November 8, 2009

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You

The Deeper Reality

Genesis 42

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Be healed and set free. Why? Followers of Jesus are immobilized by guilt. I am sure that it will not take long for each one of us to remember something we have said or done that wronged another that remains unresolved. Joseph's brothers had much to feel guilty about.

You remember Joseph. Joseph was the second to the youngest of Jacob's twelve sons. He was the firstborn of Rachel after God opened Rachel's barren womb. Joseph was loved of his father more than any of the other boys. He was sold into slavery by his brothers who told their father he was attacked by a wild animal. Joseph was imprisoned in Egypt for a crime that he did not commit while serving as a slave. He was ignored by the Butler and Baker after meeting them in prison and interpreting their dreams, but recognized with the position of governor for interpreting Pharaoh's dreams.

The Joseph narrative depicts a generation that wasn't enamored with the modes of faith from earlier generations. The old idiom of faith had become unconvincing. There was a theological and cultural crisis in Joseph's day. The intention of the Joseph narrative is to articulate that in the contingencies of history the purposes of God are at work. The Joseph story develops the theme of the Pentateuch by showing the gradual fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham in Genesis 12:1-3.

Joseph was a man after God's heart. He was the premier dreamer of all the characters in the Bible. However, no person seemed to have his entire life altered by dreams, positively and negatively, the way that Joseph did. Positively, *Joseph dreamed of being a person of influence: Gen. 37:7; Joseph dreamed of his influence extending throughout the known world and beyond: Gen 37:9.* Negatively, *Joseph's brothers despised him: Gen. 37:8; Joseph's father rebuked him: Gen. 37:10; Joseph was sold into slavery: Gen 37:28; Joseph was stripped of his ornamental robe: Gen 37:31-33; Joseph was banished from his homeland: Gen 39:1.* But Joseph remained a man after God's heart.

Famine shocked the known world. Food was nowhere to be found, except in Joseph's granaries. Jacob was the one to mention it first. "I have heard that there is grain in Egypt. Go down there and buy some for us, so that we may live and not die."¹ Starving people from all over Egypt and surrounding countries came to buy from Joseph's granaries.

Ten of the eleven brothers went. Jacob did not send Benjamin, because he was afraid that harm would come to him. Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar, Dan, Gad, Asher and Naphtali took just enough food and water for the trip to Egypt. On the way they quarreled. What they had done to Joseph thirteen years earlier came to the surface. Levi blamed Simeon; after all, Simeon was the oldest when they had sold Joseph into slavery. Their secret festered in their hearts.

Many were traveling to Egypt to buy food. Hunger was visible everywhere. Long line ups waited outside gates to the granaries. Joseph's brothers waited. Finally, they were allowed to enter an office. In the office sat an important Egyptian. His coat sparkled with jewelry and colors. People bowed in the dirt on the ground before this man.

"Where do you come from?" the governor said. Reuben answered for them all, "From the land of Canaan to buy food."² The Egyptian ruler responded, "You are spies! You have come to see where our land is unprotected."³ The brothers denied the accusation. They had come for food. The brothers felt that God was getting back at them for what they had done so many years ago. For years they had gotten away with lies. Now they were saying the truth. It was a defining moment. They responded, "Your servants were twelve brothers, the sons of one man, who lives in the land of Canaan. The youngest is now with our father, and one is no more."⁴ The governor wanted to see the youngest brother. The brothers would not be allowed to leave Egypt unless their youngest brother came to Egypt. The brothers were thrown into prison.

¹Genesis 42:2

²Genesis 42:7-8

³Genesis 42:12

⁴Genesis 42:13

For three days, nothing but darkness. Surely this was God’s judgment. But such thoughts he kept to himself. On the third day, they got word from the governor. “Do this and you will live, for I fear God: If you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here in prison, while the rest of you go and take grain back for your starving households. But you must bring your youngest brother to me, so that your words may be verified and that you may not die.”⁵ They said to one another, “Surely we are being punished because of what we did to Joseph.” Reuben spoke up, “Didn’t I tell you not to sin against Joseph? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we all must give an accounting for his blood.”⁶

Then, the governor returned. He had Simeon chained and removed from his brothers. The governor immediately filled the remaining brothers’ bags with grain, the money they had paid for the grain and enough provisions for the journey home. The governor told them to return home and bring back the brother who was left behind. And the brothers left. They did not realize that the governor was Joseph.

The journey back was slower. They stopped just outside of the land of Egypt for the night. One of the brothers opened a sack of grain to feed them, to his surprise, all the silver he had brought to buy the grain was back in his sack. He had received all his grain for free. Collectively, the brothers thought, “What is this that God has done to us?”⁷ You can imagine that they felt they would be judged as thieves when they returned to Egypt.

Without returning the silver, they continued on their way to Canaan. When they arrived, they told Jacob what had happened. They told him the truth. In the past they had told him lies. Now they were honest; honest about the demand that Benjamin, their youngest brother be brought back to Egypt, or else they would be judged as spies and Simeon would die; honest about receiving their grain for free. Fear gripped their hearts. Their father was first to speak. “You have deprived me of my children. Joseph is no more and now Simeon is no more, and now you want to take Benjamin. Everything is against me.”⁸

⁵Genesis 42:19-20

⁶Genesis 42:22

⁷Genesis 42:28

⁸Genesis 42:36

Reuben saw the tears and the dread in his father's eyes. Being the oldest, he wanted to give his father some hope. Reuben said, "You may put both of my sons to death if I do not bring him (Benjamin) back to you. Entrust him to my care and I will bring him back."⁹ But Jacob refused. Benjamin would not go. To lose Benjamin would certainly be the death of him; death from sorrow and sadness.

Oh the deeper reality of sin. Guilt. Honesty. Healing. Freedom.

Joseph is the son who knows what is happening and had all the power. Jacob is the father who cares and grieves his loss. The external agenda is the prince of the empire giving food to this helpless family. The internal agenda is the control of Benjamin. The dramatic power is in the unequal struggle between father and son, with the brothers as intermediaries. The son will win, because he controls the food and because he has the necessary knowledge. He will win because he has had a dream dreamed over him. The families struggle for survival is at the same time their struggle for faith, a struggle to trust in a promise and a struggle to believe in the power of a dream.

Guilt has enormous power. God knows the brothers' guilt. They are not free enough to have faith. They are harnessed to the past. They cannot see themselves as a generation of promise bearers. They are unable to think of any generation after themselves. They cannot be open to any new possibility, either as a new gift from God or as a fresh work of Joseph. Their guilt informs their view of God. God is punishing them. They see their guilt as the definitive factor in human and divine relations. As a result, the brothers must live in a world where no new thing can happen or even be thought of. Joseph, on the other hand, is the one the brothers think dead, but who holds in his hand the power of life. He is a man of passion for his family. The dilemma is clear: the brothers are guilty; Joseph was wronged; Jacob was deceived; Joseph owns the food.

What is the lesson here? Guilt must be alleviated. Why? Guilt inhibits relationships, self, life, ministry and the advancement of the kingdom. We must all deal with our guilt. The guilt of convenience, racism, preferences, judgmental actions and words, sexism, materialism, selfishness and overall disobedience to name a few must be confessed. Guilt inhibits our sanctification. Guilt causes us to be bad stewards of God's promise to Abraham that we will be a blessing to all people. Guilt thwarts biblical stewardship.

It is all about Stewardship; stewardship of time, talent and treasure. Never the same: When the Word Changes You. Joseph's brothers were being changed by God's Word. They were fulfilling Joseph's dreams. They

⁹Genesis 42:37

would bow to their brother and other nations would bow as well. The bowing was recognition of guilt and how God will not be mocked. Those who name the name of Jesus must be obedient to God by trusting the promise and living the dream. And how we use our money is integral to how we demonstrate trusting the promise and living the dream.

Our motivation for giving should not be fear; it should be faith. Our giving to the church, financially and otherwise, must be rooted in faith. Eastminster has legitimate needs such as utility bills, cooling towers, curriculum and salaries. As we continue to build dynamic children and student ministries, support missionaries around the world, prepare a new generation of Deacons as shepherds to serve the members in their parishes, serve the city of Wichita through “Serve and Celebrate” and LOVE Wichita, mobilize the congregation through Crown Ministries small groups to experience financial freedom, develop our four worship services in the reformed tradition and engage our presbytery in missional reformation, we demonstrate faith, not fear as our motivation for ministry.

These legitimate needs (ministries) require money motivated by faithful stewardship of time, talent and treasure. Legitimate needs and ministries, however, are not the end; they are the means to accomplish something greater. We should give to meet the need of fulfilling the great ends of the Church which are “the proclamation of the gospel for salvation of humankind; the shelter, nurture and spiritual fellowship of the children of God; the maintenance of divine worship; the preservation of the truth; the promotion of social righteousness; and the exhibition of the Kingdom of Heaven to the world.”¹⁰

The reason to make a stewardship commitment is gratitude. As Christians, we need to give to show that we are truly grateful for all that God has given us. You received a letter from me two weeks ago speaking to our ministry as the hands, feet, arms, mind, ears, eyes and voice of Jesus to others. Prayerfully consider the need, response and motivation for giving. Use the stewardship financial commitment card as a tool. The Bible teaches tithing. We are to be people changed by the Word.

There will not be an ingathering Sunday this year. We are going to do ministry that glorifies God and furthers the kingdom. We will have a balanced budget in 2010. You will give as biblical followers of Jesus with gratitude for what God has done in your life and a burden for others to know Jesus through your life and the ministry of Eastminster. As individuals and a congregation we step out in faith, not fear as together we will fund Eastminster’s ministries. We will fund God’s dream through our time, talent and treasure. Jesus said, “To what can I

¹⁰*The Book of Order*, G-1.0200

compare this generation? Wisdom is proved right by her actions.”¹¹

When I think of Eastminster *being church* as opposed to *doing church*, I envision a place where St. Teresa of Avila’s poem comes alive; a place that is vibrant and growing, that is actively engaged in the world and that is a home for a community. I love the sense of freshness and newness inherent in the idea of a living, breathing, growing place. Listen to St. Teresa of Avila’s poem. I think it describes what Eastminster is becoming and what you and I strive to be.

*Christ has no body but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world,
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.
Christ has no body now but yours,
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
Yours are the eyes with which he looks
compassion on this world.
Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
-St. Teresa of Avila*

Being church is *being the best Jesus someone sees*. The ministries of the church require money. Look how God used money in Joseph’s brothers’ lives. Joseph gave them the grain they bought and their money back as well. Joseph held no grudges. Joseph held no view of his self importance. Joseph trusted the promise God made to Abraham and lived the dreams he dreamed.

Joseph’s brothers were guilty. The famine in the land was God’s mechanism for them to deal with their guilt. Joseph was God’s vessel of grace to the brothers despite their misunderstanding, abuse and sin against him. John the Baptist came simply announcing the coming of Jesus. And the people called him a demon. Jesus came and loved the sinner and the people called him a drunkard and a friend of tax collectors and sinners. Joseph was rejected by his brothers, but his faithfulness to God proved God right by his actions.

What is God’s view of money? Money is neither good nor bad: it is merely a medium of exchange. Because God is so good, he uses money for our benefit and the advancement of his kingdom in several different ways. First, *God uses money to strengthen our trust in him*. It is often through money that God can clearly and objectively show us that he is in total control, if we will trust Him and accept our positions as stewards and

¹¹Matthew 11:16, 19.

managers of his possessions.¹² Second, *God uses money to prove his love*. God's Word tells us that God assumes the responsibility of providing the basic necessities for everyone who trusts in him.¹³ Third, *God uses money to demonstrate his faithfulness*. Moses reminded Israel that it was God who would give them the power to make wealth.¹⁴ And fourth, *God uses money to unite followers of Jesus in blessings*. God will use the abundance of one follower of Jesus to supply the needs of another.¹⁵ Money united Joseph's brothers in their resolve to tell the truth. Once we understand how God uses money, we generally become more familiar with his plans and purposes for our lives.

We want to be a church which uses money to strengthen our trust in God, prove his love, demonstrate his faithfulness and unite followers of Jesus in blessings. Being the church necessitates admitting guilt, honestly confessing sin, receiving the healing of forgiveness and being set free to live missionally.

Never the Same: When the Word Changes You. The Word asserts that God is the author of life; that sin is deadly, but God has a way out of the predicament; that there is a way for a new beginning; that God's intent for you and me is other than we deserve; that God will accomplish incredible things through you; that God remembers you even when you forget him; that God will wipe away your fear and enable you to go through anything in life with courage; that God's tests build your faith like nothing can; that the broken parts of your life provide the best opportunities to have an encounter with God; that God uses circumstances to change you; that if you aim at anger you will miss the target of the dream; that times of crisis allow you to deepen your relationship with God; that by admitting your guilt you will be healed and set free.

God is the dream maker. The dream is for humanity to be reconciled to God in and through Jesus Christ. Oh the deeper reality of sin. "But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."¹⁶ Admit your guilt. Be healed and set free. Let us pray!

¹²Matthew 6:32-33

¹³Matthew 7:11

¹⁴Deuteronomy 8:18

¹⁵Acts 2:42

¹⁶Romans 8:10-11

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