

The Rock: 06-28-2020

Long-term faithfulness:

The journey of Joseph

First reading: Luke 15: 14-17

Title: The prodigals are in need

Scripture: Genesis 42 (read 1-17 only)

Theme:

Grace is a wonderful thing. In what begins here in the encounter with their long-lost brother, one would think vengeance, justice, reparation.

Instead what we see is the beginning of a reconciliation and restoration.

Introduction:

We return to Joseph this week after having been focusing on the Church and what her role in our society and culture is.

Picking up in Genesis 42, we are at the beginning of a reunion now 20 years in the making. Honestly, almost 4,000 years on, this story is still a timely one.

Not only because it's true, but because of the truths found in it. A story of

grace, forgiveness and reconciliation. Things we all desire deep down within ourselves.

Our sin will always find us out and the day of reckoning cannot be avoided. You see, every prodigal eventually comes home.

Whether that happens over the course of a life-time, or it happens soon after they leave. When God calls you His own, it is impossible to escape His love and his discipline.

A discipline geared toward growth if we understand the truth of our sanctification. We are all works in progress, each of us having done things that we wish we hadn't, and at times live with the guilt and consequences of those choices.

God's not in the business of beating us over the head with our past. But he does want us to confront it, deal with it and grow forward in a healthy way.

Chapter 42 starts that journey for the brothers who have spent the last 20 years under the distrustful eye of their Dad, and now unknowingly, bowing down to the brother they hated and sold into slavery

The Story:

The famine has begun, and because of Joseph's gifts, Egypt was set to provide grain to those who needed it. Jacob finds out and doesn't kindly ask his boys to go and get what they need.

"When Jacob learned that there was grain for sale in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you look at one another?" And he said, "Behold, I have heard that there is grain for sale in Egypt. Go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. But Jacob did not send Benjamin, Joseph's brother, with his brothers, for he feared that harm might happen to him."

-Genesis 42:1-4 ESV

Twenty years on, and Jacob is still dealing with the pain of losing his son Joseph. His lack of trust in his sons is pretty clear when he snaps at them and says essentially: "Why are you sitting around doing nothing? We need food, now stop sitting around staring at each other, and go get it."

Whatever happened that fateful day 20 years prior may not have been completely known to Jacob, but it's clear he has yet to fully recover from that loss.

His refusal to send Benjamin, Joseph's brother with the others is a clear reminder that not only is he still in charge of this family, but he still doesn't completely trust them.

Derek Kinder makes this observation of Jacob:

"Under a father's eye their actual crimes might be covered up -but not their character."

-TOTC Pg. 210

You see, decisions we make never involve just us. Nothing happens in a vacuum in our world. Decisions have that ripple effect, and it impacts so much, and so many around us.

Sadly, sometimes the consequences last a lifetime, even when our mistake and decision was but a split second of time.

Their decision, made in anger all those years before has set in motion many things. Things which impacted relationships, trust, personal guilt and feelings of shame.

None of us escape those things, any more than these guys. How we face it, how they face it and handle it when finally confronted with it is actually more important.

How Joseph handles it as well, is critical for us. Because grace begins after a lifetime apart.

"And Joseph recognized his brothers, but they did not recognize him. And Joseph remembered the dreams that he had dreamed of them. And he said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land." They said to him, "No, my lord, your servants have come to buy food. We are all sons of one man. We are honest men. Your servants have never been spies."

-Genesis 42:8-11 ESV

Joseph, it seems had adapted to and adopted the culture of Egypt. To the point where his brothers thought he was Egyptian. Yet, it's clear that the culture didn't get into him.

While it seems pretty mean that he messes with his brothers the way he does, and it actually looks as though they are going to "get what's coming to them", that's not what is really going on.

Follow me here -Joseph already knows they have one Dad, that's a given. He also knows they aren't spies, although accusing them of being one makes good sense and carries a penalty worse than what he had suffered at their hands.

It's the statement they make that they are "honest men". Really? They're a lot of things, but Joseph of all people know, they aren't honest.

Put yourself in Joseph's place for a minute. Think through how you would handle these guys. What would that look like? 20 years of your life "gone".

If you look at your circumstances that way, bitterness and anger always lead the charge. Eye for eye, tooth for tooth. Right?

It is amazing what the writer gives us here. The humanity of this story and the hints of God working behind the scenes in the hearts of these guys.

We aren't spies, we all have one Dad, and there was 12 of us. How that must have hurt Joseph to hear.

"And they said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of one man in the land of Canaan, and behold, the youngest is this day with our father, and one is no more."

-Genesis 42:13 ESV

Joseph tells them they need to bring the youngest brother to him, or they will be tried as spies.

Joseph doesn't look too grace filled, does he? This story isn't exactly shaping up for a happy ending. BUT if we ask God to show us what HE is doing here through Joseph, the story unfolds in His way, His time, and fulfills His purposes.

At some point these boys have to confront what they did. They had been running for a lifetime from their sin. They sold their brother, and lied to their father.

How that must feel, the loss of a child, and I wonder: Do you fully recover from that? Because that moment is still affecting how Jacob makes decisions.

Benjamin, the only connection Jacob has to Joseph has stayed home with Dad in safety. He doesn't trust his sons. This dysfunctional family, God chose as HIS family to bring about the message of reconciliation, yet they can't even get out of their own way.

For whatever reason, I believe the Holy Spirit, the brothers begin to put the pieces together.

"On the third day Joseph said to them, "Do this and you will live, for I fear God: if you are honest men, let one of your brothers remain confined where you are in custody, and let the rest go and carry grain for the famine of your

households, and bring your youngest brother to me. So your words will be verified, and you shall not die." And they did so. Then they said to one another, "In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen. That is why this distress has come upon us." And Reuben answered them, "Did I not tell you not to sin against the boy? But you did not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood."

-Genesis 42:18-22 ESV

They believe the day of reckoning has arrived, and it has, but it isn't going to end as they would think. Again -eye for eye.

No, what Joseph begins here and carries to completion in the remaining chapters of Genesis, paints a graphically clear picture of the love of God for us that is seen in what Jesus did on the cross.

But, just like the brothers here, a recognition of our need has to be seen. We have to know that we need Jesus and God's grace. He will not force himself upon us. He will never make us do anything.

BUT -His love for us runs so deep, that He will not allow us to run away forever. The Prodigal son in Luke 15, from our first reading finally hit bottom.

When his sin found him out, he realized he had nowhere to go but up -AND HOME:

"And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger!'"

-Luke 15:14-17 ESV

"And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring

the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate."

-Luke 15:20-24 ESV

Grace, mercy, forgiveness. But first a realization that HE WAS IN NEED. The choices he had made in his life needed to be dealt with, and His father did not excuse them, but rather forgave them and restored him.

Through his long exile, Joseph has had time to work out his issues. He has grown in ways his brothers hadn't. We see that in his words: "I fear God"

Joseph understands accountability and the impact of his choices. To send only one home will not be enough to carry all that is needed back to Canaan.

So, instead, I'm going to send nine of you home, one of you stays. This seems like punishment to them. Because there is no way around them having to tell their father that he has lost another son.

This whole scene is forcing them to deal with their sin. Why? Love, that's why. We don't think so, because we think that anything which is hard or makes us

uncomfortable can't be something God has worked in us.

Because He is a God of love, life must be comfortable, successful and we will never have to look deep into ourselves and admit, I need Jesus!

How deep the guilt they must have had over the years. Undealt with issues have once again festered to the boiling point and they know it is because of what they did to Joseph.

Their "good riddance" attitude all those years ago is bringing back the memories of that day. Verse 21 again:

"In truth we are guilty concerning our brother, in that we saw the distress of his soul, when he begged us and we did not listen."

-Genesis 42:21b ESV

Kinder again:

"A taste of retribution (Distress...this distress) was awakening feelings which a brother's and father's tears had left totally untouched."

-TOTC Pg. 211

Broken clay pots, every single one of us. YET, we are filled with the GRACE of God. Sealed up by Him, through Jesus. Your

past, no matter how bad, if brought to the cross, is forgiven, redeemed and restored.

You have to deal with the fallout, yes. The struggle to forgive yourself may very well take a life-time. But the best way to begin that journey is to bring your pain to Jesus.

Work out your salvation. Do the hard work of working out what God has worked in you! When you start there, you begin to look at other human beings the way Joseph looked at his brothers.

Not in anger, in fact he wept as he saw them wrestling with their guilt. But in a way that desires restoration, not retribution.

When you walk out into the wider world as a follower of Jesus. How do you see people? How do you start conversations with them? How do you think of them if you know their past?

If I was judged on my past, and that can be as close as yesterday, I shouldn't be your pastor. But I am. Why? God, that's why.

All of us have a past, and the beauty of Christ is that he knows it better than we do, and loves us anyway.

The prodigals are in need, but they discover they need more than grain. They need forgiveness and restoration, they need reconciliation. All are far more important than physical food.

I want to close with a quote from one of my favorite artists of the 80's. Way back before time began. Bono, in a book of collected essays says this:

"It's a mind-blowing concept that the God who created the universe might be looking for company, a real relationship with people, but the thing that keeps me on my knees is the difference between grace and karma...

You see, at the center of all religions is the idea of karma. You know, what you put out comes back to you; an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, or in Physics - in physical laws - every action is met by an equal and opposite one. It's clear to me that karma is at the very heart of the universe. I'm absolutely sure of it.

AND YET, along comes this idea called GRACE to upend all that 'as you reap, so will you sow': stuff. Grace defies reason and logic. Love interrupts, if you like, the consequences of your actions, which in my case is very good news indeed, because I've done a lot of stupid stuff...

The point of the death of Christ is that Christ took on the sins of the world SO THAT what we put out did not come back to us, and that our sinful nature does not reap the obvious death. That's the point. It should keep us humbled...its not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven."

-Bono 2013: In conversation with Micha Assayas

These boys are going to see grace abound. Karma, as it were, isn't going to have the last say. But not before they confront themselves and what they have done...