

**The Reverend Mark S. Merrill**

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**Who Is That Man?**

Psalm 133 & Genesis 45:1-15

He had arranged the perfect set-up. Years ago, having agreed to kill, this their brother, but instead, selling him into slavery, these 10 of his 11 brothers never expected to encounter him again. And they were not aware who this man was that they had encountered as they had gone to buy grain in Egypt because of the famine that was stalking their homeland. But he, this man in charge, knew who these men were – Joseph had recognized his brothers. He was harsh with them and began to put them to the test; but he was also generous – giving them all the grain they needed, provisions for their journey home, and having their money put in their sacks of grain. He also asked of their father and others of the family. He showed them a hard & tough exterior; yet had to leave the room to weep when he understood them as they talked about ignoring him when he pleaded with them from the pit into which they had thrown him those many years ago.

He kept the 2<sup>nd</sup> eldest of the brothers, Simeon, as a hostage when the others left. But Joseph warned them that they could not return to Egypt to get more grain unless they came back with their youngest brother, Benjamin. Once home, and telling their father, Jacob, of all that had happened and of the words of this Egyptian official, Jacob would not hear of Benjamin leaving him. But the grain they brought back from Egypt eventually ran out. If they were not to starve to death, they were going to have to go back to Egypt. The brothers finally convinced their father to send Benjamin with them. They took gifts for the Egyptian official and double their money. Upon arriving in Egypt the brothers were told that they were to be guests at the official's home for a meal. There they were reunited with Simeon. When he came in the room, Joseph again asked of their father. But Joseph was overcome with affection at the sight of Benjamin and had to leave the room so he could weep outside their presence. And as the brothers sat down to eat they were amazed to see that they were seated in their birth order. The set-up Joseph had arranged continued to unfold.

The next day the brothers set out on their journey back home, not knowing that Joseph's plan continued. He had ordered their money put in their sacks of grain, but also one of his silver cups to be placed in Benjamin's sack. After they were gone for a short time, Joseph sent his steward after them to accuse them of stealing from Joseph. The brothers proclaimed their innocence and stated that if, in fact, one of them was guilty, that one should remain in Egypt as a slave. After the cup was found in Benjamin's grain sack, they tore their clothes in grief, before being led back into Joseph's presence. They fully expected to be punished, maybe even killed on the orders of this mysterious and heartless government official. The brothers proclaimed their guilt and called themselves Joseph's slaves. Joseph would hear none of that. His intention was to keep only Benjamin and send the others back to their father. Would the brothers abandon Benjamin to save themselves, just as they had abandoned Joseph to satisfy their jealousy and hatred of him? This time, Judah spoke up, setting forth a brief history of what had transpired and the dynamics of the family. He pleaded with Joseph to let him take Benjamin's place for he did not want to put their old father, Jacob, through the trauma of losing Benjamin – it would surely cause his death.

The brothers' words and actions indicated that they had stopped putting themselves first - others were to come ahead of them. They had come to understand the "integrity of the family and their responsibilities to one another."

And so we come to the scene from Genesis 45 read earlier. The one who was masked, at least to his brothers, finally revealed himself. Time and all that had happened to Joseph in Egypt - his servitude to Potiphar, his long imprisonment, his service to the Pharaoh that made him the 2<sup>nd</sup> most powerful man in Egypt, his marriage and the birth of his two sons - none of this had diminished his attachment to his family. Though they had bowed down to the "Egyptian" official, there is no mention of their doing so before their brother, Joseph, or of apologizing or asking for forgiveness. We read just of Joseph kissing, weeping upon, and embracing his brothers.

Joseph, in a position "to determine the outcome of events, chooses not to take revenge for past injustices but makes peace with those who mistreated him and thereby brings about the reunification of the family." There is reconciliation of sorts between the brothers.

"The Straight Story" is a 1999 movie that tells the true story of Alvin Straight. He is a WWII veteran who lives with his daughter in Iowa. He receives a phone call that his estranged brother Lyle, who lives in Wisconsin, has suffered a stroke. Alvin decides that he will go visit his brother to make amends before either one dies. But Alvin's vision is impaired and his legs are not good, so he cannot drive a car; and his daughter cannot drive. He does not have enough money for a bus ticket. He makes up his mind to make the journey on a lawn tractor with a trailer hitched to the back. The movie chronicles his 6-week, close to 300 mile journey - the people he meets and how they impact one another. It is a journey he must make in order to try to make things right. The Rev. Bob Naylor wrote, "Alvin Straight's slow, arduous journey on his lawn tractor to bring reconciliation with his brother is a powerful witness to the patience and tenacity that is required if we are to make things right; if we are to tear down walls that separate. Alvin's serendipitous encounters on his journey with ordinary, caring folk underscore the Good News that even though the journey to reconciliation may be painful, we will be surprised by joy in doing what is right in the sight of God."

For Joseph and his brothers, their journey to reconciliation had been a long, arduous, and painful one. As Rev. Blackburn said last week, the brothers' guilt for what they did to Joseph more than 20 years ago, lay just below the surface of their lives. Seeing their father day in and day out and what their treachery had done to him meant they could never bury this to a distant memory. And they had had to learn to deal more constructively with their father playing favorites - for now that he believed that Joseph was dead, Jacob had made Benjamin, his 2<sup>nd</sup> son by his beloved but now deceased wife, Rachel, his obvious favorite son. And Jacob seemed quite willing to sacrifice Simeon, leaving him imprisoned in Egypt, in order to protect Benjamin.

In one of his one-minute radio spots, the Rev. Stephen Bauman reminded his listeners that at a "Morals Summit" organized by the Religious Leaders Forum of South Africa a code of conduct was adopted incorporating the following principles: integrity, incorruptibility, good faith, impartiality, openness, accountability, justice, respect, generosity, and leadership."

In his book, "Season of Life," Jeffrey Marx writes about Joe Ehrmann, a former NFL football star & captain of the Baltimore Colts, and now a volunteer coach for the Gilman high school football team in Maryland, and an ordained minister. Joe has developed his "Building Men for Others" program that includes the following precepts: "being a man means emphasizing relationship and having a cause bigger than yourself, it means accepting responsibility and leading courageously, it

means having empathy, integrity, living a life of service to others, and enacting justice on behalf of others.”

In his book, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, James Alison, writes of Joseph becoming a man for others:

Joseph exercised Pharaoh’s generosity as though he had never undergone any of the experiences which led him to his position. He was so entirely free of any sort of resentment that he was able to imagine an entirely generous and sustained program for the reconciliation of his brothers, ....

I don’t suppose that Joseph was free from resentment as he was sold into slavery by his brothers. He had time for meditation as he was dragged off to Egypt, meditation which could easily have turned into bitterness, resentment and despair. He had cause for more of the same when his seemingly safe job got turned into a trap by the wife of his master Potiphar. And in whose entrails would the worm not have turned during a long and undeserved jail-sentence? Yet it was in the midst of these experiences that Joseph developed an awareness of being loved such that he recognized that none of the people against whom he might justly feel resentment were really worthy of his dedicating to them that weight of emotional involvement. And he moved beyond even that, to a position of such freedom that he began to be able to plot not vengeance, but sustained forgiveness as the gift of humanizing others.

Through the eyes of faith and with the benefit of hindsight, Joseph was able to see God at work in all of this, giving his family’s history meaning and purpose. One writer on the internet explained it this way:

A good illustration is about Persian rugs. It may just be a myth but it has been said that when a Father taught his son the art of weaving a rug they would work together on the one rug. The Father knew the pattern he wanted but if the apprentice son made a mistake he didn’t undo it, rather he adapted the pattern to accommodate the mistake. ... The brothers’ actions have become God’s by being woven into the divine life-giving purposes.

Joseph exhibited grace in speaking of his and his brothers’ experiences as part of God’s plan, of God working for good, and God’s concern for life and the survival of this family. This likely was not the kind of man the brothers expected Joseph to be toward them. For them, the picture of him that must have remained in their heads and hearts was of a terrified and devastated 17 year old being dragged off out of their sight to be sold as a slave in Egypt. Wouldn’t we likely be like them in expecting that, if in the most remote of chances they ever encountered him again, he would do all he could to exact revenge on them, to treat them as they had treated him. He could have easily shamed them and dealt with them as one with royal authority. Instead, before them was a man becoming a man for others, exhibiting:

incorruptibility

generosity

leadership;

a man emphasizing the relationship of family,

having a cause bigger than himself, overcoming any resentment toward his brothers in order to save them, as he also worked to save the people of Egypt and all who came to Egypt seeking food.

Joseph was not a finished product – he had take his brothers for a ride, treating them harshly, and exacting some revenge upon them. Joseph was still on the journey of becoming the man God

created him to be. Going through all he had experienced, he came to realize that God was at work in his life in order to bring about God's will and purpose. God was in control and could use him even in his changed circumstances. "Human nature, even human sin, cannot interfere with the gracious and kindly purpose of a friendly God, who cares, not for his chosen people alone, but for others also. So instead of using his power and authority to seek revenge Joseph instead offered blessing and forgiveness." God wills to preserve life. Joseph understood this. Though having attained wealth, influence, and authority for himself, Joseph chose not to be remembered by these, but rather what he did to save his family, his living for others.

This is confirmed for us when we read later of Joseph's continued loyalty and care for his extended family in the following words from Genesis 50:

15 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?' 16 So they approached Joseph, saying, 'Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17 "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. 18 Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.' 19 But Joseph said to them, 'Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20 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. 21 So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.' In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Who is that Man? Well, Joseph was now a man for others. He had come to know that at every turn of life, in every moment large and small, he had choices to make about how he intended to live in the world and his choices had moral consequences. He chose to build his life on patience, forbearance, endurance, forgiveness and compassion. May we be inspired to do the same.