

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

Friends, we are excited this day to continue in our sermon series that we started last week—Beginning Again. We use this beginning of the new school year to imagine together how our faith calls us to Begin Again, first in our faith, then today with family, next week with our foes, and the final week, on Labor Day weekend, with our friends. So, we will spend some time today wrestling with what it looks like to begin again with our family. The story that we're going to read is, uh, maybe not your normal family story. This one—it's um pretty traumatic, to be honest with you about this family story. So I want you to know that when we talk about beginning again with and in our families, you might be doing so from a place of trauma. You might be in the midst of dealing with death or in the midst of separation. You might be dealing with something a little bit different as being an empty nester for the first time, or even being a parent who is allowing someone to re-nest over time. You might be having a change in your family related to graduation, or perhaps there is a trauma that you have endured. Perhaps the change in your family has to do with the reversed roles between parents as you become, as children become caretakers. When we talk about beginning again, not all of the stories of that in family will be traumatic, but I do think that there is wisdom in this story that we're going to read together from Genesis 45 for each of us in our families, blood and chosen, and for each of us to know how it is God calls us into a new season together.

Before we read the text I have to give you a bit of a recap. So we're going to read from Genesis 45, but many years and many chapters earlier in Genesis, we get the beginning of this story. Joseph is the beloved son of Jacob, of Israel, okay? He is one of many sons; he is the one that his father loves dearly. He's the one that always gets the twinkle of his father's eye.

Joseph also is very gifted, so he has the ability to dream incredible, divine dreams, and he is very willing to share that giftedness with his brothers. He probably doesn't understand how it comes off, but they don't like it. They like it so little, actually, that they kind of ostracize him. He kind of is off on his own amongst the brothers, and scripture tells us that there was this interaction between his father and Joseph. His father says, "Where are your brothers? You're supposed to be with them." He says, "They're out tending the flock out in the field." He says, "Go find them." And so Joseph goes out to find them, but he can't find them, and he asks for directions, and the path of God shows him the way.

But his brothers, they see him far off and they know it's Joseph, and all the anger and angst that they have towards their brother, in the moments it takes for him to walk across the field to them, they devise a plan. They say we're going to get rid of this brother of ours. They contemplate very quickly the idea of killing him, and then they put that to the side. They say how about we just throw him in a pit, in a cistern. So he comes over and they do just that, but then they stand at the edge of that and scripture tells us about this conversation that they have. "I don't want to leave him here," one brother has mercy and says, "why don't we... why don't we...see that caravan...caravan going across that other hill. Let's wait for them to come here, and then let us sell him into slavery." And so they do that. So Joseph is sold as a slave into Egypt under the authority of pharaohs, and it is over time that God does something in that place. Joseph becomes the chief steward, almost like the chief of staff for Pharaoh. He rises in power in

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Egypt, so much so that he controls the way in which crops are handled. God gives him a vision that there is going to be a famine, so Joseph is able to prepare Egypt and actually the surrounding areas for the famine that's about to come. When the famine befalls the whole area, his brothers, his family, they're hungry; and so they actually come down to Egypt. They ask for food. Joseph provides it, but he keeps his identity private; he doesn't reveal to them who he is—not until we read together from Genesis 45.

Before we read that text, let us go to God in prayer.

Gracious Spirit, as you moved across the waters of creation, we pray that you might move again here. Move amongst us and within us to quiet us that we might hear your word for us. And comfort us and challenge us and inspire us in our living.

May the words of my mouth and meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Beginning at the first verse of chapter 45—

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?' But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come closer to me.' And they came close. He said, 'I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; God has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, "Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay.... You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.'" Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked to him.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So the scriptural witness is one that lets us know that the families that we are blessed with are in one way or another gifts to us. They can also be very hard gifts. You think your family is messed up? Read about Joseph's family. It's part of the reason why we chose this particular text, and it actually doesn't get much worse than the family dynamics that Joseph was dealing with here even as he revealed himself to his family. What I love about the Bible is that it is honest about

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

the difficulty of family. It also names, truly, the beauty of the family, but it doesn't gloss over the rough edges of what it means to be bound to one another by blood or by choice.

The passage actually begins by acknowledging the pain that comes from being family. The scripture attests that Joseph wailed and wept so loudly that all of Egypt could hear him, even the Pharaoh. You imagine this just shooed everyone out of the room. They'd close the door behind them. They'd know his voice. He is a leader amongst them, and then there is this wail that goes on. A cry. Can you imagine how many times Joseph has wept over his family? How many times he has wailed, and nobody knew why after he was doing it? Can you imagine that...that guttural wail that comes from deep hurts, particularly familial wounds?

The author of scripture wants us to know right here at the beginning of chapter 45 that familial pain is real, and it is witnessed to, and it is seen by God. God sees our pain and knows our pain, just as God sees the joy that we experience in the family too. The reality is though that every family has pain, every one of them, maybe not as traumatic as this, but there are difficulties that every family has to live and navigate through. I told you a couple weeks ago that summer vacation for the Powers family when I was growing up involved a couple of different beach trips, and one of those was to Litchfield Beach. We actually went to Litchfield until I was about six years old. Hurricane Hugo came through in 1988 and just leveled Litchfield Beach. It was a pretty big storm if you grew up in South Carolina or North Carolina. Before that, though, we would spend a week together every summer in the same house in Litchfield Beach, and I remember one particular summer—our last summer there. Everyone in the family was able to come. This is my mother's side of the family, my maternal side, and so I had my uncle there, my aunt there, their spouses, all the cousins. There's this picture that's immortalized on one of my bookshelves in the house. It's this last picture of our family all together in one place. It's out on the porch of that house in Litchfield, and it's looking out over the water. It's just kind of a snapshot of a moment in time. If you were really looking at that picture, you might imagine that everything was good. Everyone's smiling, got a nice tan, all that sort of stuff; but the reality is that there was always this...this air when the maternal side of the family got together, my mom's side of the family got together. There wasn't...it wasn't that heavy, but it was present. There was just a tension between, particularly my mother and her mother, just kind of lived there...out there. I never really understood it. Maybe if you were a daughter or a mother, you might have experienced a similar dynamic before, during the season of your parenting, or being a child. There was something in the air when we came back in from that nice beach picture; and they came in and sat around the table, and we were having hamburgers together. My grandfather had spent time that afternoon grilling up some hamburgers, and so we sat down around the table. We said a blessing and then we all got a hamburger. I ate my first one. I was like five. My appetite I thought was big, and so everyone had finished dinner, so I raised my hand, and I said I want another hamburger. And my grandmother, who had the plate of hamburgers right in front of her, she said, "David, you don't need another hamburger. You've eaten all you need to eat." And my mother snapped quickly and said, "If my son wants a hamburger, he'll get the hamburger." And everyone nervously laughed and kind of froze, right, and then Nana picked up the plate of hamburgers and passed them around. I got one of them, and I got one or two bites in, and I

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

turned to my mother right beside me, and I said, "Mom, I'm full. I can't finish this hamburger." She looked at me as stern as she would ever look at me, and she said, "You're gonna finish that hamburger." So I did. We stayed about 20 minutes after everyone else was excused from the table, but I got the hamburger down. Trigger warning—it's about to get gross. So that night I woke up and I knew something was wrong. It was the middle of the night, and I knew something was wrong. It kind of felt like a dream. I realized I had gotten sick while I was asleep, right? When we're little, we do that, and so I was embarrassed, but I knew what I needed to do. I got off the top bunk—gross—for whoever was below me, and then I went to the bathroom and kind of cleaned myself up and turned on the shower, just like rinsing off, and so that woke my mother. She came in and she surveyed the damage—my clothes, the bed, the sheets. I got out of the shower and she helped me dry off, and then she said, "Pack your stuff; we're getting out of here."

She got my dad and my sister—really quiet. It's like 3:30 or 4 o'clock in the morning. We hit Columbia, South Carolina, by the time the sun came up. I remember my grandmother being on the porch, really just a little bit too early drinking her coffee as she watched us to pack up. "What happened?" she said.

We didn't answer. That was the last time my mom and my grandmother would talk for three years. They lived about 45 minutes away from each other. We would spend almost every other weekend there. If it was football season we were watching Clemson, and if it was summer, we were on the lake riding around in the boat and that moment in time shifted the dynamic of our life, at least on that side of things. Every family deals with pain in different ways. Hurricane Hugo would destroy Litchfield Beach a year later. That episode would mark our family for several years. Now I've gone to plenty of therapy, and I do not blame myself for wanting a second hamburger.

It turns out...it turns out that children and parents have dynamics that we might not understand, right? Each of them in different ways. What that story is supposed to communicate is that each of our families has a different kind of pain. Maybe it's something that you can remember or mark in time when things changed, or maybe it's been a slower burn over time. But family for all the joy they can bring, they can also bring pain. And that is what the story in scripture illumines for us this day. The story teaches us that the familial pain is... it's made into the fabric of who we are. And people closest to us that we love most deeply can also wound us.

I can't imagine how much work Joseph had to put in in order to speak the words that we just read here in Genesis 45. Joseph, mind you, is a victim of trauma in this situation. Let us not forget that. He is the one, blessed and as talkative as he was, he's the one that got thrown in a pit and then sold into slavery. He has every right to be angry. He has been wounded by his brothers. He has been deprived of growing up with a father and a mother that he loved and wanted to be near.

And so the only way I can imagine Joseph gets to where he is in Genesis 45 is by doing a whole lot of work. I don't know what the equivalent was for a therapist back in Joseph's day, but what I

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

do imagine is that it took a whole lot of reflection and a heaping helping of God's grace for Joseph to get to where he is in Genesis 45. Maybe he even imagined the lives that his brothers were leading. Maybe he put himself in their place and their feelings of jealousy and envy. Maybe he imagined how you might even think that hurting or casting a brother off would relieve your pain. Maybe he was at some point able to empathize with them. He didn't need to, he was a victim in this situation, but whatever he did, the key is that Joseph did the work. And what's important about that he chose this work in particular is that he didn't do it in tandem with his family. The work he decided to invest himself in was not dependent upon whether his brothers were doing their work.

He knew that he needed to get to a place of health, and so he did the work and the prayer and the reflection to get himself to a better place by God's grace. If you want to ensure that you're not going to begin again with your family, make your willingness dependent upon their willingness to engage in the work. Let me say that again. If you want to ensure that you're not going to begin again with your family, make your willingness to do the work dependent upon theirs. "I'm not going to go. When they go to therapy, I'm going to therapy. When they say they're sorry, I'll say I'm sorry." Joseph doesn't do that.

But Joseph's story also reminds us—this is the part of the good news—that...that we can do work. We can pray and reflect. Joseph had to figure out a way to forgive his family. I had a friend who grew up in a broken home and could never forgive her family for the ways in which she was treated. She said that she couldn't forgive her family, so instead she asked God to make her more forgiving, not forgiving towards them, but overall more forgiving. She imagined if God might help reshape her posture in that way towards the world, that maybe there would be an effect on the family at some later time. She talked about going into her counselor's room for the first time, and she described the trauma that she had endured to her counselor, and she said, "I've been through this trauma. I don't want to talk about it."

So the counselor after a couple minutes said, "That's okay, you don't have to talk about it. Can you write about it?"

Joseph's posture toward his family is not dependent upon their repentance. Joseph chooses a posture that honors his own soul and his calling and his God.

Here's the thing. Joseph's work, it helps to reshape him by God's grace. Joseph's work helps to reshape him, and we see that in the way that he tells the story, that we know the story. We've just read it a few chapters ago. We know what actually happened. It was envy and jealousy and anger that led his brothers to throw him in a pit and then ultimately to sell him into slavery, but that is not the way Joseph understands the story. It is also probably for me the most problematic part of the text we've read this morning. Joseph says to his brothers, "You didn't send me here. God sent me here. God sent me before you to preserve life."

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

And so, what we have to wrestle with is the idea that did God ordain that terrible thing that happened in Joseph's family?

I imagine this morning that all of us when we're dealing with the trauma of our families, we have to make meaning of it. And what I read in the text this morning is Joseph doing the work to figure out what the meaning is. I don't actually want to believe that God went before Joseph to preserve life. I don't want to believe that it wasn't the actions of the brother, that it was actually the actions of God. And then I see what Joseph has to say about his own story.

And then we look at the biblical witness; and, in fact, the only reason why this family is going to be nourished and not die of famine is because he is where he is. I don't believe that God ordained the terrible thing. God did not create the brokenness in Joseph's family, but God did use that brokenness to reveal God's power. God doesn't bring about the trauma that Joseph endured, but God did use that for transformation. As uncomfortable as it might sound to us, it is the way in which Joseph makes sense of his story. And if we read the biblical witness, it's part of what actually happened. Joseph has been given a vision that allows him to be off in his own place, but to be held in esteem, honored and nourished in a different kind of family, one he would have never chosen. He has loads of esteem in that place. He has great influence. God has continued to bless him over and over and over again, and because of that, entire people are going to be nourished. Because of that, a family that he actually wouldn't have ever chosen is going to be nourished and sustained, and because of that also, his family is going to be sustained for generations. Because of the work that Joseph did by God's grace with the trauma in his family. God must have in some way opened Joseph's heart to see the possible things.

My mom and my grandmother didn't speak for three years.

Things were never the same. Maybe you've had that sort of brokenness in your families. But we did start getting back together. I'd get to go spend weekends there. We'd sit around tables together, that same air that we had down in Litchfield, but there was a part of it that they kind of released with it. It was never...it was never the same.

But a daughter and a mother could figure out a way. They went to therapy together. They figured out a way by God's grace to occupy the same space and allow us to continue to grow as a family.

For Joseph, I imagine, he's never sitting around the table with his brothers again when he's not thinking about what they did that day when he went out to find them when they were taking the sheep out to pasture. It's never the same again.

But when he's done telling them who he is, he wraps this, you can imagine, putting his head on the neck of his brother Benjamin and weeping, and then kissing his next brother and doing the same thing, kissing his next brother and doing the same thing, over and over and over again. It will never be the same, but Joseph believes with all his heart that God has done something in the midst of that brokenness that's going to allow him to begin again.

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, August 20, 2023

I don't know if you feel like Joseph. I don't know if you feel like the brothers. I don't know if you feel like Jacob. He's lost his son. What I do know is that this story tells us that when it comes to family, a lot of them chosen, God can offer something brand new. It might look very different than what you experienced. You're not going back to what it was, but the God that we know in Christ, you could imagine that he's going before you, that there is something of boldness and goodness that can be found in that place when we choose to do the work of it, when we choose to begin again in our families and to rest in the power of God. I believe with all my heart that God desires to reconcile the heart of God's family. It will never be the same, but it could be good and it can be faithful and it can be true.

In the name of the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.