



“What’s in Your Heart?”

Texts: Genesis 45:1-15, Matthew 15:10-20

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If you've spent any time with me, you may have heard me say, “every family has its own flavor of dysfunction.” Today’s Old Testament story is a story of dysfunctional family dynamics, riddled by hurt feelings, resentment, and rage.

The story begins in Genesis 37, with Jacob, who is the father of 12 sons. As the story progresses, eight chapters later, the Jacob we find in Genesis, chapter 45, is now older and wiser. He has watched his children grow up, and has the benefit of his lifetime of experiences. We can imagine that Jacob’s journey into full maturity has softened him, and in the face of his mortality he has come to more fully appreciate what is truly important in life.

Jacob’s 17 year old son, Joseph, is at the center of this story. Born to Jacob late in life, Joseph enjoys the privilege of being his father’s favorite son, and receives all of the gifts of this favoritism, symbolized in this story by the special coat that Jacob gives Joseph to wear.

Joseph’s 10 older brothers had a very different experience with their father when they were growing up. Their father, Jacob, was younger and more ambitious. Jacob’s methods of discipline and his priorities shifted as he matured. As it often happens in families with multiple children, it is likely that a young Jacob was harder on his older sons, and expected more from them than he did now from Joseph.

As the older brothers watched Jacob dote on Joseph year after year, it felt like an intentional slight. Jacob’s obvious affection for Joseph opened the door to a wound in the hearts of Joseph’s older brothers, who themselves longed for their fathers appreciation and approval. This hurt in the heart of Joseph's older brothers began to fester into hatred for Joseph, and that hatred became so profound, that the 10 brothers did the unthinkable. They faked Joseph’s death, lied to their father, and sold Joseph into slavery.

Though the brothers no longer had to deal with seeing Jacob favor Joseph, and in one way, their problem was solved, but living with consequences of what they had done was a burden, especially as they watched their father bear the weight of his grief each and every day, knowing that they were responsible.

Meanwhile, Joseph, who was sold into slavery, was on his own journey of suffering. He lost his whole family, his freedom, his identity, and the future that would have been, and yet God was with them all. God was with Jacob in his grief. God was with Joseph's brothers in their sin, and God was with Joseph whose whole life had been taken from him.

Hate, resentment, and unforgiveness taints everything that is good and beautiful, and the consequences of acting out in hatred, resentment, and unforgiveness touches everything that it encounters. The consequences of sin ripple through our lives leaving a wake of suffering and sorrow, division, and strife.

If we jump to the end of this story, we find that a terrible famine has driven Joseph's family to Egypt to buy grain. By this time, God has given Joseph favor in Egypt, and by God's hand has positioned Joseph into a position of power as a governor in Egypt. Genesis 42 tells us that when Joseph's brothers came to buy grain, Joseph recognized them, but didn't reveal his identity. In Genesis 42, 43, and 44, we see Joseph tests his brothers to see if their hearts have changed. He wants to know if their hearts are still hard and full of resentment. He wants to know if they are still the brothers who were capable of the evil they had done to him, but what Joseph finds is that the brothers were grieved at what they had done and were willing to give their lives to save their father any more grief.

It is an emotional story, as you see the conflict Joseph carries in his heart. On one hand, his elation at finding out that his father is still alive and the joy of seeing his family once again, and on the other hand, he was not eager to entertain the brothers who had betrayed him and caused him and their father so much pain and suffering. He needed to know he could trust them again.

After a series of tests, Joseph finally reveals his identity. He says, "it's me. I'm your brother". The brothers, expecting Joseph to respond to them in the way that they knew they deserved, were dismayed and afraid. But Joseph doesn't respond vengefully, in fact, he carries no resentment or bitterness towards his brothers, nor does he gloat or rub it in their faces that things have turned out okay for him after all. All Joseph can think about is whether his beloved father is still alive. All he can see is his family, his people, and he throws his arms around his brother's necks weeping and kissing them and tells them go get our father and come back, and live here, and I will make sure that you have everything that you need.

Taking a moment to reflect, I ask, "Where do you see yourself in this story? "Where do you see others in this story?" Maybe this story really resonates with you because of difficult relationships in your life. As for me, I have been all these characters. I have been betrayed. I have been rejected. I have been jealous and resentful. I have been hurt. I have been the one who has hurt.

As American Christians, we are often guilty of subscribing to “princess theology”, in which we always see ourselves as the hero or the wronged, and never see ourselves as the villain or the one who needs a change of heart.

It is important that we have the ability to do this, to be able to recognize and account for what is true in our hearts. As followers of Jesus, we must be able to identify the ways in which our actions have caused hurt or have harmed others, and as this story models for us, we must also identify the hurts in our hearts and lives before they lead us to do unimaginable damage to ourselves and others.

It is human nature to cast blame when conflict arises. We want to have a logical reason, “why” bad things happen. Jacob could have been a better father in his youth, and he is responsible for his own short-sightedness and for the ways his impatience and ambition blinded his heart to the needs of his older children. That is Jacob’s sin and the trigger for this family tragedy. The brother’s sin is that they neglected to find God’s grace and love in the midst of their pain. They let their fear and hurt lead them away from faith, faith in their father’s love, and grace for their father’s shortcomings. This is a critical point in this story. No matter what is going on in our lives, we must hold on to our faith and trust in God, especially when our suffering is deep.

Living a life of faith in God in the midst of suffering takes the intentional work of honesty and vulnerability about what is going on in our hearts. It takes seeking God and growth to identify what is affecting the thoughts in our minds and the intentions of our hearts. Our decisions and our behavior are shaped by those feelings and perceptions, and if those feelings and perceptions are leading us away from God then, we are in danger of being stuck in a cycle of pain and suffering that can become a wall to keep God’s restoring and healing presence from working in our lives.

God is with us, whether we are the villain or the hero in our story. God cares for us and is working to make this world new in us and through us. As followers of Jesus, it is up to us to seek God’s plans for good in our lives and live a life of faith and trust in God. God can use any circumstance and any tool to transform our lives.

One of the tools God has used greatly in my life is the Enneagram. The Enneagram helped me begin to see the ways in which I was contributing to harm against myself and against others in my own life. God has used the gifts of a very good therapist to help me move forward through difficult experiences in my life that had the potential to sabotage love and grace in my life. Good friends, the love of others, an accepting faith community, and the wisdom of mentors are all tools God has used to bring healing in my life, to break down my walls, and to build my trust and faith in God.

With God’s help, we can move towards wholeness. We can recognize who we truly are at our core. This kind of self-discovery can also help us identify the way in which our environments and experiences have shaped us and recognize their influence over us in the way that we respond to difficult situations in our lives. Whatever the tool, it is important to better understand ourselves so that we may live healthy and flourishing lives in community with each other.

Joseph's response speaks volumes about what is in Joseph's heart, and how his journey shaped him and how the love of his father impacted the man he became. Joseph had every right to get revenge and to make his brothers feel the same pain and loss and estrangement that he had felt all those years, and his brothers knew it, but Joseph's heart was right. Joseph had forgiven them.

Today's Gospel lesson from Matthew tells us that the motivations and intentions of our hearts are revealed by what we say and do. "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach and then out of the body? But the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart comes evil thoughts - murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person.

The question that I ask you, and I ask myself today, "What is in your heart?" What is nurturing and feeding what is in your heart? Do you speak words of faith, or words of fear? Do you speak words of unity, or do you find fault? Do you speak words of cooperation and fellowship, or do you speak words of resistance and pride? Is stress and grief clouding God's good work in your heart?

I don't know what's in your heart, and I don't know who you are in your story, but I do know that when we live lives of faith in God we will speak words of life and goodness. I know that when our hearts are rooted and grounded in the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, our lives become a blessing when we offer forgiveness, love, compassion, and empathy. Living a life of faith empowers us against every evil and in every battle. It is the living God who holds the power to transform our hearts to love no matter what challenges and obstacles we may face.

We are facing a new political season. We are facing tension with family or the loss of family over the coming holidays. We are facing a new future in society and the church. This church is facing a future that is unknown.

It is easy to get caught up in the things that can turn our hearts away from God's grace, love and peace, which is why now, more than ever, we must lean into God's presence in personal prayer and study, in corporate worship, fellowship, and friendship. We must lean in and seek God, feeding ourselves on the Bread of Life and drinking from the fountain of Living Water.

We need God's healing and wholeness at our core, so that as we go into a season of prayerful discernment, participating in small groups and in listening to each other and dreaming about the future of this congregation and our future pastor, and as we face challenges both known and unknown, that we are able to contribute faith and hope and blessings to one another in this fellowship of love. May our hearts be shaped and molded and freed to love God and one another with our whole hearts. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Mother of us all, Amen.