



UNCHAINED: When the Community Has Failed Me

Genesis 37:12-28

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The past couple weeks we have looked at some of these areas of pain that deal with ourselves. We looked at times we find ourselves angered at the place in which we find ourselves, wondering how we let ourselves get here. We looked at ourselves as a people who are struggling in the midst of seasons of addiction, seasons of self-doubt, seasons of anxiety and depression, and seasons of grief, saddened by a former life that seems lost. We looked at examples of Jesus extending forgiveness to find a word of forgiveness for our own guilt – guilt that is maintained for allowing ourselves to become the person we are today.

Today, we are shifting a bit to consider other areas of hurt and guilt, which is not focused on ourselves, but on the people around us. It is perhaps not so rare to find ourselves angered that others either directly caused, or at least allowed us to experience hurt and pain in life. There are many examples where we find ourselves troubled that friends and family would abandon us in times of distress when we needed an advocate. There are many of us who are angered that, having shared our pain with others, having sought a counselor or confidant, the person we trusted most seemingly left us out to dry, offering us no real support or guidance to move out of and beyond our self-named complications.

How does one extend signs of the forgiveness of the Creator, how does one engage in the act of reconciliation, when the pain of such brokenness is so real and not easily forgotten? How do we break free from the pain of such a self-experienced guilt, and a projected guilt, to once more live freely as the communicative, supportive, and faithful community of which God has led us to be a part?

Our story this morning offers us perhaps one of the best examples in the scriptural text of such a situation. The story of Joseph, which is often hailed as nothing more than the foundation of a great musical about a Technicolor Dreamcoat, offers us a great launching point to see how forgiveness is seen and experienced when family turns its back on family. The story is, in its rawest form, a Biblical witness to the pain of a community turning its back on others of its own. But the nuances of the story of Joseph are often overlooked. The story is deep and rich, but when we focus solely on Joseph as one who was mistreated by his brothers, we often lose the full impact of the Biblical narrative. Much like many of our own situations of failed community support, there is often more than one side to the story. But we focus on our side, because it's ours, and we're in pain. I want us to consider today the story of Joseph from two perspectives – Joseph's perspective, and the perspective of Reuben, Joseph's eldest brother. Before we get to their story, there are some important notes regarding the family that will help us to understand the complexities of the Joseph and Reuben relationship.

Jacob is the father of both Joseph and Reuben. Jacob had fallen deeply in love with Rachel – she was the true love of his life. But her father decided to take advantage of his love for her, and tricked Jacob into marrying his elder, less-eligible daughter, Leah. Jacob was then also given Rachel as a wife just a week later. So he had two wives – and their maidens. All four women would end up bearing children for Jacob. Leah gave birth first to Reuben. As the eldest son, he had the customary blessing of the first-born male. Leah gave birth to five more boys and a daughter with Jacob. Her maiden, Zilpah, gave birth to two of Jacob's sons; Rachel's maiden, Bilhah, also had two sons for Jacob. Finally, after the first 11 children had been born, Rachel, Jacob's true love, gave birth to two sons, the first of which was Joseph.

Jacob had a special place in his heart for Joseph. He was not his first-born son, but he was the first-born son of his true love – the woman he longed for most. Joseph was treated by Jacob with extra love and prestige. Loving him so dearly, Jacob makes for Joseph a robe with long sleeves – a sign of his royalty and prominence among the siblings.

Considering the difference between Reuben and Joseph, imagine with me what such a family dynamic might have been like ...

Joseph:

I am a dreamer. I dreamed a dream of a time to come, when I alone would stand above my brothers. A dream by God, no doubt, a promise and foretelling of a future hope. The dream made sense. My father, one whom I love dearly, loves me dearly back. He showers me with blessings, offering little question as to which son he loves most. Though I am nearly the youngest, my father holds a special place in his heart for me. But amidst such lavish praise, I feel there are tensions in our home. I can't put my finger on it – I don't know what could cause such tension. My father chose me to be his promised son – and that makes sense, because that was what my dream was all about. It was a promise by God that I will be the one who reigns over our family. My father's praise is right and just.

Reuben:

It is unjust!

I am the first-born son of our family. I have the rights to my father's inheritance. I alone stand as the one to lead this family when my father is no longer capable. I've heard there was family drama even before us children came along. That's not my problem – dad can deal with his wives as he wishes. But my mom, Leah, she was my father's first wife, and I her first son. I am the rightful one to reign over this family. I may not be perfect; I mean, I've made some mistakes, but still ... Rachel comes along having never been able to have a child, and all of a sudden, she has a son, and dad starts treating him as if he were more important than my brothers and I. Joseph, and that ugly long-sleeved coat ... in some ways I'm happy dad didn't make me wear that thing. ... My brothers and I, we hate him. He's always gloating about these dreams that promise him he will one day rule the family. As if dad's love for him isn't enough,

he talks as if God has some grand vision for his life. Look, a dreamers gonna dream, but none of us like his dreams. He's clueless – like he doesn't even realize how much we hate him. Just to be clear, we hate him.

Joseph:

You know what's great about being the favored son, everyone loves you.

Though, things didn't go as I expected with my brothers. Dad sent me out one day to fetch the others from the fields. They were out watching the sheep. I don't blame dad for sending me out, some of them were pretty bad shepherds. I had told dad that he shouldn't trust some of the others with the flock. I can only assume that's why he sent me out there that day. I went out to find them, but they had moved further on to some other fields, and when I finally got there, when I finally found them, they weren't acting normal. They seemed upset. But I couldn't quite figure out what was going on. Next thing I know, they jumped me.

Reuben:

We jumped him.

My brothers wanted him dead. That was the first plan, just to feed him to the wolves. But I objected, I refused to let them kill my brother – our brother. Don't get me wrong, he deserved it. He was a self-serving snob who didn't deserve the love dad showed him. He turned his back on us as a family for his own prestige. But he didn't deserve to die. So, we took that gaudy dreamer's coat off and threw him into a pit.

Joseph:

They threw me into a pit, and they took my coat!

They left me in that pit, not even giving me water or food. What traitors. They turned their back on me. I mean, who do they think they are? I just couldn't wait to find my way out – dad was going to be furious. I don't even understand what happened. One second they're telling me all about their day, catching me up on the flock. We were just shooting the breeze in the field, and then they jumped me. It came out of nowhere. I was furious.

Next thing I know, I hear all this commotion taking place. They haul me out of the pit and sell me off to some mercenaries. Shackled up like a slave, they sent me off with the Ishmaelites – forsaken people in our land. They sentenced me to death. I blame them all, but you know I think was behind it? Reuben ... I knew he had a problem with dad's love for me. He's Leah's first born son, and he couldn't deal that dad loved me more than him. He couldn't accept that his inheritance would go to me instead. If I had my guess, he was behind it all.

Reuben:

I turned my back for one minute, and they had sold him off. I didn't really even have a say. I was trying to protect him. Sure, I couldn't stand his self-loathing dreams, but I didn't want his blood on my hands. But this clan of tradesmen came by, Midianites – Ishmaelites as they call themselves – and my brothers sold Joseph to them. He's as good as dead with them. But he turned his back on our family. He longed for power so much, he couldn't see the pain he was causing in his midst. Off he went.

Joseph:

Off I went. Dragged all the way to Egypt where they sold me into slavery. They failed me. My own family – they cared so much and only about themselves. They failed me.

Rueben:

He failed us. One of our own brothers; he cared so much about himself, that he failed us.

...

The truth of interpersonal dynamics, the reality of societal and community turmoil, the foundation of many of our deepest pains with one another as human beings, is that we never know the full story. In our angst, we never learn to listen to the other. We feel hurt and deeply wounded because of the actions or voiced expression of the other, but we don't always know what's going on beneath the surface.

It would be easy to call out the brothers for the pain of the family. The brothers are the ones who sent Joseph into slavery, almost taking his life themselves. But perhaps the complexity of such broken relationships is not as easy as blaming the one or the community who commits the acts of rebellion and violence. Perhaps the fault for such deep-ingrained discontent is not at all the fault of the one *or* the other. Perhaps the fault lies in the inability or the failure for all parties involved to create true, authentic, and real relationships with one another.

At the expense of reconciliation, we refuse to take the steps modeled by God in Christ, to come down and personalize the truth of God's love. Reconciliation is impossible when we refuse to see those with whom we disagree face to face as created and loved children of God. True, God-fearing, Christ-centered community isn't possible when we seek to barricade ourselves from or exile those with whom we have never found common ground. We ruin the opportunity for God-divined reconciliation when we *other-ize* those for whom we want to offer no forgiveness, thus justifying our own hatred.

“Reconciliation with those who have hurt us – or those who we have hurt – sometimes appears impossible.”ⁱ But it only appears impossible so long as we maintain our rightness and lack the willingness to meet the other on a platform of equality.

And here's the kicker of this story. Joseph goes on to become quite powerful in Egypt. And he, Joseph, at the bequest of his dying father, extends forgiveness to his brothers. Such an act is no small feat – for his brothers, freed from the chains of guilt – having thought for all those years that they had failed their brother – they go on to do great things. The brothers go on to be the head of the twelve tribes of Israel. Reuben, Simeon, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin ... they become the foundation for the next generation of faithful followers of the Almighty God.

When we hold guilt upon ourselves or lord it over others, we make it impossible for the freedom of God's grace to be experienced in this lifetime. When we refuse to see the humanity of the other, we fail to express the love of God's forgiveness offered to them. When we withhold the love that comes from God, exemplified in the grace of the Son who gave his life on the cross, we are complicit in maintaining the captivity of the other to sin and guilt. But folks, don't forget the good news – this is the gospel message – don't miss the message of the reconciliation of Christ. Christ didn't just die on a cross so you could be forgiven of your sin and spend eternity in heaven, Christ died on the cross so that all people – people of all nations, ages, races, orientations, nationalities, places of origin – that all people may live freely in the love and the life and the truth of the one who came before us and called us beloved – who called us worthy – who called us ... every one of us – he called mine. So receive that love, extend that love, receive that forgiveness, and extend that forgiveness, and may you rejoice in the great freedom of living unchained. Amen.

ⁱ Erwin W. Lutzer. *When You've Been Wronged*. Moody Publishers: Chicago, 2007.