

## **I Am Your Brother**

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Genesis 45: 1-15

Joseph wasn't always in Egypt, just as Israel wasn't always in exile in Babylon. But, it's helpful to remember that this story about Joseph was edited into this final version which we have now in scripture during the Babylonian exile. That's when the Jewish people first became "a people of the book." And their situation of exile shaped the way they told and retold all the stories of themselves as a people, because of course, they were looking to those stories for a current Word of God for them in exile. So, their understanding of their stories and consequently the way they told them and wrote them down was shaped by exile, as they sought to understand just what God intended for them in this horrible situation.

So, Joseph wasn't always in Egypt. You remember, back home in the land of Canaan with his family, he was the dreamer. But, more importantly he was the dreamer who, as he recounted his dreams to his brothers at breakfast every morning, somehow he was always the one who came out on top. In his dreams, his brothers were always bowing down to him and whatnot. You can imagine how that got a little old. Put on top of that the fact that Joseph was already his father's favorite. You see, his father Jacob only ever really loved one woman and that was Rachel. But, Jacob also had Leah as a wife and Leah had borne Jacob all these sons, but Rachel had been unable for many years to conceive. But, finally, she had borne Joseph, and then later Benjamin, Joseph's only full brother. So, you add all the dreaming stuff on top of the fact that he was already his father's favorite and you can see how very old it all got for his brothers.

So, you remember the story, how one day Joseph's brothers conspired together to kill him, but thought better of it and instead only sold him into slavery. Nice guys... that way they could be both rid of him and bit richer as well. At any rate, that's how Joseph ended up in Egypt, because of the despicable, evil actions of his own brothers. It was a terrible thing to sell your own brother into slavery, and to let him be taken away from his family and homeland. Living in exile.

And yet, this is a story of faith isn't it? It's a story about how God turns the evil of these brothers, the evil done to Joseph into something for the good of all of them. It's a story about how God turns exile into home. Joseph needed to be who he was – a brother and a son, a member of a family and a community that knew him fully and accepted him. Sure, Joseph had been highly successful in Egypt. His ability to correctly interpret dreams, something he saw as a gift from God, had put him in the good graces of Pharaoh. And Pharaoh had installed Joseph as the head of his whole court, in charge of virtually the whole land. But even so, can there be any doubt from the way this story is told, that Joseph longed for his family and his homeland?

When his brothers are there before him, as our story begins for today, having travelled to Egypt in search of food, they stand before him not knowing it's him. And the writer says, "Then Joseph could no longer control himself..." He had to reveal himself to his brothers; such was his longing for them to know him and to be reconciled with them. So, Joseph needed to be who he was – a brother and a son, and a member of a family and a community that knew him deeply and accepted him. But, before he got there evil... the evil done to him, and exile ... the strains of living as a stranger in a strange land were keeping him from what he most longed for and needed. Because, you remember, when his brothers had first shown up before him there in Egypt, he had toyed with them. He had felt the need to test them, to somehow decide for himself whether they had changed and were now worthy of him.

And all that really means is, he was not yet ready or able to forgive their evil. And as to the strains of living in exile, you remember, the story says, when "Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him," that is, in front of all his Egyptian cohorts, ... "he

cried out, 'Send everyone away from me.' "So no one stayed when Joseph made himself known to his brothers." you see, Joseph had been passing as a member of the dominant culture. And he still wasn't quite ready to risk all of that privilege he'd accrued for himself. Joseph needed to be who he was – a brother and a son, and member of a particular family and community, but evil and exile were blocking the way.

We *need* to be brothers and sisters. We know that. The theological language of our faith that says that for us is that we are created in the image of God. Because, of course, we know God as Trinity, which means we understand that God exists in intimate relationship in God's very being. God being love, exists in loving relationship—Father, Son, and Spirit. God being love, exists in loving relationship with all creation. And we are created in *that* image. In order to be fully who we are, we *need* to be brothers and sisters.

But, there is so much that blocks our way isn't there? Not the least of which is the evil that has been done to us by our brothers and sisters, in our families, across town, or on the other side of the world. And perhaps not the least of which is the fear of losing some of the privilege we've accrued in living as part of our dominant culture, you know, even though we come here to remember that our allegiance goes *first* of all to Jesus... and that we are *first* of all church... the Body of Christ, and only secondarily Americans, or Elktonians, or Spotswood Trailblazers.

Rabbi Jane Rachel Litman tells the story of her friend Richard, who on the first of January each year concludes his own unique and somewhat odd Jewish ritual. He will unclasp a necklace with the Star of David almost the size of your fist from around his neck and recite the prayer: "Blessed are you, Eternal God, Sovereign of the Universe, Who made me a Jew." After watching him do this for the fourth year in a row, she asked him, "Remind me why you do this." She had asked the year before as well. Richard looked at her with a patient, long-suffering gaze, "I put on the star every year on the Sabbath after Thanksgiving. I take it off on the Sabbath after New Year's Day. I wear it throughout December so that everyone sees that I am a Jew. It's my own personal statement of identity."

Rabbi Litman explains that in America December is a difficult month for Jews. It's not that they are grinchy, she says. Most Jews like Christmas. It's nice to see the beautiful lights and the festive shop windows. People in the streets and stores are so friendly. It's nice to live in a land where they can go to their Christian friends' Christmas celebrations, and where Jews and Christians can live together in peace. But, she says, "the seemingly universal 'spirit of Christmas' renders Jews painfully invisible." Or, on the other hand the season can make Jews painfully visible as a minority. In either case, it's a strain and a challenge.

I think that's interesting to think about for us. Do we become invisible as followers of Jesus in a dominant culture that largely equates being American with being Christian? And how often as part of that dominant culture do we accept the status quo regardless of what we know through our faith to be our deeper need... to be brothers and sisters with all? Can we overcome the comfort of life in exile? Can we overcome the evil and injustice we have suffered? Because, as Frederick Buechner has said, "Life works us all over before it's done." So, how do we get free of all the things that bind us, that block the way? We need to be brothers and sisters, but there is much that stops us.

Well, listen again to this story of our faith. Joseph sends all his Egyptian cohorts away, and then he weeps so loudly that all the court, all the household of Pharaoh heard it. And he says to his brothers, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves... for God sent me before you to preserve life." Several chapters later, Joseph puts it this way to his brothers, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..." You see? God, working through Joseph's forgiveness of this evil and injustice he suffered, working through Joseph's willingness to risk being known

*beyond* who he was as part of the dominant culture, turns evil into good and turns exile into home. And Joseph “fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept... and he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.”

Friends, we can be set free from all the things that bind us, all the hurt and evil and injustice we've suffered, all the fear of speaking up and letting ourselves be known as a brother or a sister. We can be set free. Because this story reminds us, just as the cross and resurrection of Jesus remind us: sometimes what seems like good news to us, is really bad news in terms of what we most deeply need. And sometimes what seems like bad news is really good news. It's who our God is. The worst things are never the last things. It's why we call the Friday Jesus was crucified Good Friday. Because it was the beginning of how God took something we had completely mangled up and corrupted and raised Jesus up and sent him back to us in forgiveness and love.

We are set free by trusting in *that* God. “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.” So, we can say with Joseph, to all, “I am your brother...” I am your sister. We can be the church.

Amen.