

Time to 'fess up! A sermon in a series based on the life of Joseph, preached at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons: GENESIS 44:14-45:3
MATTHEW 4:12-17

What is this that God has done to us?

That is where we left Joseph's story last week.

Starvation has forced Joseph's nasty brothers to travel to Egypt where there is said to be food.

They arrive and while they stand in the famine relief lines, Brother Joseph, now viceroy of Egypt recognizes them.

They however do not recognize him

Joseph is not ready yet to forgive his brothers for their 20 year ago cruelty to him

So,

He accuses them of being spies and throws them into prison.

Let the brothers know what to be wrongfully imprisoned feels like!

Subsequently, Joseph (the viceroy) proposes a test – bring little brother Benjamin back here and I let all of you – except Simeon – go home.

Simeon will be my hostage until you return

The brothers' mules are packed and back to Canaan they go with a difficult assignment.

En route home, the brothers stop to check to ensure the packs of grain are secure.

To their horror, they find that in the packs of grain, there is the silver they used to pay for the grain.

The viceroy thought we were spies – now he’s going to add thievery to that!

Do we even think about returning with Benjamin? Or just say to Dad – good trip, but you remember what happened to Joseph so many years ago – the wild animals – well that happened to Simeon as well!

This morning’s lesson picks up the story.

The continuing famine has meant that the family needs more food,

So the brothers head back to Egypt for a second time with Benjamin,

A gift to appease the viceroy

And double the payment for the grain.

We are not told how long it was between returning from Egypt until Jacob finally consented to let Benjamin join his brothers on this second trip to Egypt.

I wonder what finally made Jacob change his mind about releasing Benjamin into the care of his brothers.

I wonder when Jacob finally realized that the brothers had played a very active part in Joseph's "disappearance" so long ago.

I wonder when he thought about these things, Jacob thought about his own deception of Brother Esau - which remembers involved animal skins!

I wonder what is now in the brothers' thoughts as the night comes and they are left alone with their thoughts.

I wonder who they see,

What things and events come to mind?

I suspect and as we will see presently, guilt over what they did to Joseph 20 years ago looms large.

For the story teller has already told us that brother Reuben has already spoken out

Didn't I tell you not to sin against the boy [Joseph]? But you wouldn't listen. Now we must give an accounting for his blood (42:22)

I wonder what Joseph is thinking about.

Will the brothers even bother to return or will they leave Simeon the way they left Joseph.

I wonder what thoughts occupy an imprisoned Simeon.

Chapters 42-44 develop and enhance the plot. While the suspense heightens, The action seems to slow down

Externally, not much happens in these 2 chapters.
 By the end of chapter 44,
 Things are still unresolved.

The listener is left waiting.

What you have with these chapters though is the
 members of the Biblical first family coming to terms
 with the past and with the dream – Joseph’s dream
 of 20 years ago

The brothers are now bound by the power of an
 unforgiven past,

Driven by anxiety and
 Immobilized by guilt.

**Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to
 our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded
 with us, but we would not listen. That is why this
 anguish has come upon us.’ [Gen. 42:21]**

Father Jacob wonders whether he will ever see
 Benjamin again

And Joseph wrestles with how he will deal
 ultimately with his brothers.

Worldly power as viceroy of Egypt cannot blot out
 the memories of suffering, feelings of abandonment
 and injustice – not immediately!!

There is therefore, a lot of pain and sense of
 estrangement in this family

Deception and grief over the years has taken its
 toll – *for nothing nasty stays hidden forever.*

All this is in play as the brothers come before
 the viceroy (Joseph) with Benjamin.

The gifts are given

A special meal is prepared and hosted by the viceroy

Simeon is return safe and sound

The brothers are overwhelmed by this level of hospitality.

They prepare to return home to Canaan with again full sacks of grain.

This time though not only has Joseph again returned their money in their sacks, but he has also secretly placed a special silver cup in Benjamin's grain sack.

The morning after their departure, Joseph gives the order to the household steward that the silver cup has been pilfered.

Get the guards and go after those brothers and the one in whose grain sack you find the cup,
He will become my slave.

Back to the palace everyone returns

The brothers are frantic – for they have heard the steward's words about the possessor of the cup becomes the viceroy's slave

They have already torn their garments in high anxiety and worry

They now throw themselves at the viceroy's feet asking for mercy.

Then comes Judah's plea on behalf of Benjamin's return to Jacob

**, 'What can we say to my lord? What can we speak?
How can we clear ourselves? God has found out the**

guilt of your servants; here we are then, my lord's slaves, both we and also the one in whose possession the cup has been found.' (44:16)

The guilt to which Judah refers is **not** guilt over the silver cup.

For they have not in reality stolen it

I think *the guilt here is a confession of a much earlier wrong doing.*

I think all this high anxiety, toing and froing has brought to the surface,

The guilt they have long felt over what they did to Brother Joseph.

What Judah says here on behalf of all the others is clear evidence of *repentance for wrong doing.*

The rest of chapter 44 is high drama and emotion

As Judah pleads with the viceroy –do not make Benjamin your slave.

To return to Canaan without Benjamin will kill his father

For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father. [44:34]

Something is happening.

These are not the same brothers of 20 years ago

Rather than selling a brother in their care as they did then.

They are willing to exchange their lives for

Benjamin's – become the viceroy's slave, rather than have Benjamin be enslaved.

And this time, through Judah, they have confessed their guilt to one they believe still to be an unknown to them – beyond that of viceroy of Egypt.

The brothers are not going to walk away this time, motivated by self-interest and self-concern.

No, the brothers have 'fessed up.

I wonder what is going through Joseph's mind as he hears Judah's words

What restraint he must have had.

Again, we are not told the specifics of how long – but the first 3 verses of Chapter 45 there is the “reveal” as Joseph tells his brothers who he is...

Little wonder then the brothers initial reaction is
...they were terrified at his presence [45:3]

What does this morning's portion of Joseph's story highlight for us?

There can be no real healing, real reconciliation, in this life without repentance.

Not the sort of flaccid 'sorry' kind of repentance often said by siblings and friends when we are told to say “sorry” for what you have done.

That's not real repentance – that's kid apology which is rarely meant for the long term.

Yet some of us still see repentance solely as feeling sorry or bad about something, or some action in which we have been the principal or just a participant.

Repentance is not about just feeling bad – it is about Transformation,

Meaning a change of orientation, character and direction that is so pronounced and dramatic that the very form and purpose of a life is decisively altered, reshaped and turned around.

Judah is not the Judah of old

He and any of the other brothers are willing to take the place of Benjamin.

He and the others are more concerned about what coming back to Canaan without Benjamin will do to their father.

They are no longer driven by thoughts of what is in it for me,

What will benefit me the most?

That is a big change. And in this case...it opens the possibilities for healing and even for reconciliation between brother and brother, son and father and perhaps even father and son.

Without confession and repentance, reconciliation will never happen.

Perhaps that is why reconciliation does not happen as often or seems not to hold longer than it could.

The world in which you and I live and even in many communities of faith, words like sin and repentance and contrition and confession are viewed as exclusively churchy words for the holier than thou people.

What are we to do?

How can we open ourselves and others to see that confession, contrition and repentance are as necessary to effect reconciliation between God and us, others and us and within ourselves as they have ever been.

Well, first I believe we have to accept that we are not perfect – St. Paul **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.**

Not easy!

There is a tendency within each of us – to want to look everywhere but to ourselves for the sources of our problems and the problems of others.

- When questioned – do you think that maybe, just maybe you might be wrong or in error--I am never wrong.
- It's their fault – they are to blame
- I am not being judgmental – it is just that someone has to keep people in line and I am the best qualified.

Personal self-righteousness and pride can fog in as it were how necessary confession and repentance truly is to live as Jesus would have us live – ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven.

We also have to accept that this struggle toward repentance will be just that –a struggle.

Again, I find St. Paul's own struggles so insightful and honest.

From Peterson's The Message

"I know that all God's commands are spiritual, but I'm not. Isn't this also your experience?" Yes. I'm full of myself—after all, I've spent a long time in sin's prison. What I don't understand about myself is that I decide one way, but then I act another, doing things I absolutely despise. So if I can't be trusted to figure out what is best for myself and then do it, it becomes obvious that God's command is necessary.

17-20 But I need something *more!* For if I know the law but still can't keep it, and if the power of sin within me keeps sabotaging my best intentions, I obviously need help! I realize that I don't have what it takes. I can will it, but I can't *do* it. I decide to do good, but I don't *really* do it; I decide not to do bad, but then I do it anyway. My decisions, such as they are, don't result in actions. Something has gone wrong deep within me and gets the better of me every time.

21-23 It happens so regularly that it's predictable. The moment I decide to do good, sin is there to trip me up.

I truly delight in God's commands, but it's pretty obvious that not all of me joins in that delight. Parts of me covertly rebel, and just when I least expect it, they take charge.

24 I've tried everything and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? Isn't that the real question? [Roms 7:14-24]

We are not given a clear window on the brothers' thoughts and wrestling with conscience prompted by and fed by guilt over nasty things long ago. But I am certain that struggle was there, To come to a point of repentance in our own lives, fessing up is rarely if ever struggle free.

We also need to see and realize that repentance and confession is not just some dumb thing I gotta do to be a Christian or a piece of history, suitable only for display in a museum.

It is mandatory for all Christians throughout their lives.

Look, the coming of Jesus brought with it the call to Repentance and radical change.

That is clear in the Matthew lesson Paul read minutes ago.

In this area, Jesus was building on the work of the prophets of the Old Testament who were forever calling God's people to God's judgement upon the injustice of the social order

And the sins of the people.

That call for radical change and 'fessing up' is still in play.

I believe we need to heed such a call more than ever today.

For there is much evil and sin abounding isn't there.?

Manipulation of other people seems to be a given-from politics outward.

Lying seems to be the way it is.

What's in it for me which often disguises pure greed is rampant.

A rudeness, impatience and coarseness of language seem to be somehow now acceptable!

What's best for the common good seems lost to demands of me, mine, and I.

How we treat our poor, powerless and marginalized remains a good bell weather on how healthy and good is our society – and you have to ask yourself – how's that going?

Since all this and more is so prevalent around us – it is easy, even for communities of faith to be sucked into such a world vision, rather than maintaining a Kingdom Vision.

How often we feel like St. Paul writes in Romans 7 – who will rescue us?

The answer remains and I do not say this simplistically, easily or without out of sense of awe and wonder – Jesus Christ our Lord!

Practicing confession,
Practicing repentance,
Continues to open the doors to reconciliation.
And you can only do these things in the strength and prompting of the Lord Jesus.
Repentance is not part of the way we are hard wired.
We have to learn and appropriate it in our own lives.

God does not want the way forward for any of us to be one of just old hurts, painful memories, feelings of guilt, anxiety and insecurity.

Life is difficult enough without carrying these sorts of burdens.

The call and the challenge then is to practice and to believe in hope and with all our hearts that the first verse of the hymn we will presently sing is undeniably true for all people and for all time.

*Come ye sinners, poor and needy,
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;
Jesus ready stands to save you,
Full of pity, love and power.*

AMEN