

May 24, 2015

The National Presbyterian Church

Fellow Followers: "Joseph – Serving Your Country"

Genesis 41:29-40; Genesis 1:26-28; 2:5-14; 47:13-26; Daniel 1:3-8

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In our sermons through the spring and through the summer we're looking together at the lives of people whose stories are told for us in the Bible, the people whose lives fill major portions of the pages of scripture, and we're seeking to learn through their lives, both from the things that they did that we ought to do as well as the things that they did that we ought not to do.

We look back to the past to these people as if they are the ancestors – ancestors in the faith – who give shape to our identity, to who we are. Just as our physical families shape who we are, these members of our family of faith are to shape who we are, to help create our identity as followers of God made known in Jesus Christ.

Today as last Sunday we are looking at the character of a person called Joseph. This is not the Joseph who marries Mary who becomes the mother of Jesus (in Matthew 1: 18-25). This is a Joseph who lives somewhere between about 1600-1800 years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and his story is told in the first book of the Bible, in the book of Genesis: the last 14 chapters of Genesis (37-50: just over a quarter of the book) are about this man Joseph. So his role is a prominent role in the Biblical story. God is at work in his life just as he is at work in our lives – the same God, and so we have much to learn from his experience of God.

Last Sunday we saw a tragic sequence of events taking place in Joseph's life, tragic events spanning a period of some 13 years, from the time Joseph was 17 to the time Joseph was 30. Tragic events followed by a dramatic "turn-around."

During this time, his brothers, living in what is now Israel, sold him into slavery in Egypt. Then as a slave he was accused falsely of seeking to commit adultery with his mistress, his master's wife. He was sentenced to prison. He had no friends or family to care for him, though the chief jailer noticed his skills and talents and gave him a position of responsibility within the jail. He seemed to be forgotten by anybody who could do him any ultimate good.

And then out of the blue Joseph comes to the attention of the King of Egypt, who uses Joseph's insights and wisdom to save Egypt for a disastrous famine. Joseph, this person who has been a slave, who has been in prison, is used to save the whole nation of Egypt. The king appoints him to become his prime minister to develop a famine relief plan. And Joseph even though Egypt is not his own nation, even though he is there unwillingly, against his will, sold into slavery in Egypt, Joseph uses his gifts, his talent, his skills on behalf of the nation of Egypt – his energy, his intelligence, his imagination and his love (as our Presbyterian ordination vows put

it) – so that through Joseph a system of granaries is built, a collection is established, grain is stockpiled, and when famine hits, as Joseph predicted it would, seven years later countless lives are saved from starvation. There is food for all – not only within Egypt but beyond Egypt, so that Joseph’s own family is saved by what he does.

The famine strikes the land of Canaan. His father, Jacob, is still alive and hears about it the supply of food in Egypt. His brothers, the ones who sold him into slavery, come down to Egypt to buy food, to buy grain, and they buy it. Joseph gives it to them, and in so doing, literally saves their lives.

What I pointed out last Sunday was that all through the story of Joseph, through the tragedy and through the triumph, God is weaving his plans and his purposes. The sovereign purposes of God are revealed, leading and guiding Joseph, just as the sovereign God leads and guides our lives – whether we notice it or not; or, to put it another way, not just at the times when we notice but perhaps especially when we don’t notice it, God is still at work.

Last week we also saw how Joseph handled power and powerlessness at different periods in his life. And we experience this too. Times of great powerlessness: Joseph handled such times with great equanimity. He didn’t grow bitter or didn’t grow angry but he trusted that God was using his power on behalf of Joseph. And when he was powerful he did not abuse his power. He handled it with humility knowing that whatever great power we have as human beings is paltry compared to the power of Almighty God.

So this is what we looked at last Sunday – the story of Joseph and all its ups and downs.

This Sunday as we continue to think about Joseph I’d like us to focus on one part of his life in particular. I’d like us to focus on his work, his daily work:

- whether it’s his work as a slave when he was owned by a man by the name of Potiphar
- or when he was in prison in charge of the prisoners in the jail
- or when he became the prime minister of the land of Egypt leading the famine relief effort for this nation in which he found himself serving his nation.

In every case it’s interesting how the scriptural story points out the effect of Joseph’s work. In every case Joseph seems to have worked passionately. He seems to have worked well. He seems to have worked, as I mentioned above, “with energy, intelligence, imagination and love,” which begs the question – today’s question work and motivation. How do you do it?

- How do you work with energy, intelligence, imagination and love, and stay motivated for the long haul?
- What motivates us for work and being productive whether it’s in the workplace or in our homes or in the church or in society or in our nation?
- Especially at those times
 - when everything seems to be pointless (and we all move into those times from time to time);
 - or when all that we have done seems to add up to nothing;

- or when the daily drudgery of life seems to suck dry our energy rather than give energy to us;
- or when the great cause that we gave ourselves to, suddenly appears to be not quite as great as when we first gave ourselves to it – but becomes tarnished by the ambiguities of life, or by the compromises of life, or by outcomes which are not as we expected, not what we signed up for, or what we hoped for.
- When we say to ourselves is this really worth all the energy and the effort?

There is to me no doubt that some of you, perhaps all of you, have faced issues like this in the years that have gone by. And there's no doubt to me that Joseph faced those kinds of issues as well.

In Joseph's case we only need to think of his work as a slave for Potiphar, or in the jail as the assistant to the chief jailer. This was hardly a high profile position in the jail, nor, indeed, in the house of Potiphar. There was, as he worked in those 13 long years, no final product that he could turn to and say "This is what I created with my hand." There were no awards to be won. There were no crowds around him cheering him on, giving him energy. There was no wealth to be gained. I mean there was no money in this whatsoever. Just the same old thing day after day after day after day.

Rather like the hotel bus driver that Robert Louis Stevenson describes in his book *The Inland Voyage*. The driver's job is to go back and forth between the hotel picking and train station. He quotes the bus driver saying this: he says, "Here I am, I drive to the station and well, then I drive back to the hotel. And so on every day all the week 'round" [and then it dawns on him that this is his life and he says:] "My God, is that life, is that it?"

Is that all that there is? Or think of the words of the essayist Charles Lamb writing in the 1700's who served as a clerk for 30 years for the East India Company based in London, England. He spoke of what he called "the dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood." The dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood! Can't you feel it when you say it? The dry drudgery of the desk's dead wood. If we were to translate that into our modern language, update everything by a couple hundred years, we might speak of "the glazed glare of the seductive computer screen." Again and again, day by day, you get in your seat as you look at the screen, in front of you, all the time, day after day: "the glazed glare of the seductive screen"!

Well surely Joseph knew what this was like: thirteen long years as a slave and a prisoner! And even when freedom came and he was released from jail and slavery, and when he found a great cause to give himself to (and thank God for great causes to give ourselves to), even then there were still questions to be faced, issues that could dampen his spirit and his desire to work with all of his heart and soul and mind and strength.

Think for example of his new employer; the King, the government, the nation of Egypt. It's not his own country. It's not where he had chosen to be. He is not an Egyptian but a Hebrew. And no matter how hard he tries, he is never going to be quite one of them. For example, while

he is a worshipper of the Creator, Promise-making God, the God of his fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the people around about him are not; for the most part they are worshippers of other gods and goddesses, including the sun god Ra. He is given a wife by Pharaoh who is the daughter of Potiph-e-ra who is a priest of the sun god Ra. So that Joseph almost certainly at times found himself in moral and religious quandaries because of the context within which he lived: living and working for a people and nation which in the end, though they might have had much in common to begin with, -- in the end shared neither his faith nor his ultimate values. The pressure at times must have been enormous to conform, or simply to shrink back, soft pedal, not work quite as hard, not quite do his best in this particular place. Or just to lose the energy: so that even if it wasn't intentional he just didn't do his work with everything he had to give, less than what he could do otherwise, or what he did at the beginning.

And this would especially be the case if some of the tasks which he started with great hopes in mind, didn't turn out with outcomes that were quite as glorious as he might have wanted them to be. And this indeed happened in one particular case within his story. So what we read in the story is that Joseph started out doing what was right and good, in fact what was magnificent and necessary, work through which millions of lives were saved from starvation. I mean this was a high and a powerful calling. And in and of itself it surely was energizing though along the way often in those kinds of great causes there's drudgery to be involved as well, that most people usually don't see. But along the way Joseph is doing something marvelous and great, and then something begins to happen; what we would call *an unintended consequence* of this great cause to which he joined himself, arose, another problem arose over which ultimately Joseph had no control. And it was awful; it was not good at all.

What happened was this (Genesis 47:13-26): the granaries were built, the grain was stored, and people paid for the grain. But after they paid for their grain for a year, there were many who had no money left. So what did they do in year two? Well they sold *their possessions and land*, all of this money going to the King, so that they could have grain to eat. And then what did they do then? Well, they then sold *themselves* to the King, and Egypt, through this whole process, Joseph's plan, intended to preserve life, became a land of slaves from top to bottom. The scripture says only the priests were exempt from this slavery.

So what started out as good and wonderful and noble, in an unintended way, became catastrophic. True, people were alive, they weren't starving. But their freedom was gone and this lack of freedom eventually impacted Joseph's own people, so that his family who, during the famine had settled in Egypt would become slaves themselves for hundreds of years. An unintended consequence, starting out with what is right and noble, and all of a sudden out, of the blue an evil emerges that in the end affects Joseph's own descendants.

This kind of thing happens in life. It happens to families. It happens to corporations. It happens to nations: noble causes and organizations become sullied and compromised along the way and what we find is that in a flash, just as Joseph's plan turned from good to evil, a line is

crossed, and we are somehow in the middle of it and we're not sure always how we got there, or how to get out. But there we are! All mixed up in the middle and muddle, in something which is just not as glittery as it first started out to be. So we say to ourselves

- Where is the line between information gathering on the one hand, and invasion of privacy on the other? Think about Google or the NSA.
- Where is the line between the legitimate fighting of terrorism on the one hand, and moving into torture on the other hand? Think of Senator John McCain.
- Where's the line between legitimate creative accounting on the one hand, and cooking the books on the other hand? Think back to Enron, and many other businesses all through the years.

Ahhh! The fuzzy line which, when we set out to do good, somehow gets crossed along the way. Sometimes we don't even know how or when we crossed it, or arrived where we are. And then reality sets in, and the great cause, to which we gave ourselves, doesn't seem quite as great as once it seemed, and our heart begins to lose its resolve and passion to work; our "energy, intelligence, imagination and love" simply begins to fade away.

And we need to know what to do to stop the downward spiral. We need to know how to regain our energy. We need to look to Joseph to see how he handled these things: Joseph whose work and zeal never seemed to fade throughout the whole story; never seemed to leave him, whether in days of pointlessness or in days of drudgery or in days of disappointment or in days of disillusionment. When these things became the daily reality somehow he weaved his way through them with equanimity. How can we do the same? How can we stay the course? How can we do our very best all the way – not just when all is well, not just when the cause seems to be wonderful and we give ourselves passionately to it, but when the going gets tough and the glitter becomes faded?

This morning I want to leave you with three words which have helped me personally and which woven into the fabric of the story of Joseph. They're certainly part and parcel of the story of scripture as a whole. *Three words to leave with you which I believe help us maneuver our way through this world, using the gifts and the skills and the talents God has given us to do the best work we possibly can all the way through without growing weary.* Those words are **Complexity, and Change and Calling.**

COMPLEXITY. Let's think first of all of complexity. According to the Bible the world is complex. It is not simple. There may be some simple things in the world but the world is by and large complex. And when we forget that there is a tendency to become easily disillusioned and cynical; here is a tendency to become easily angered and frustrated. The world is complex. That is, we often live in "middle ground" which can be murk and muddy, and not straightforward. Somewhere between the ideal and the real. Caught in the middle between salvation and sin. Caught in the middle between Heaven and Earth, between the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. And in this murky muddied middle paths and decisions are not always

as clear as we would hope them to be; the distinctions between what is right and wrong, good or evil, not always clear.

David Brooks who many of you heard a few weeks ago in his recent book *The Road to Character* (pp.53-55) speaks about this muddled muddy world in the middle like this. He says “Deep inside we are jewel of nature. We are fallen but we are also splendidly endowed. We have a side to our nature that is sinful, but we have another side to our nature that is made in God’s image. We want what we should not want. We want to do one thing but we end up doing another. No one wants to self-deceive, but we rationalize all the time. No one wants to be cruel but we blurt things out and regret them later. No one wants to commit sins of omission but we all commit the sin of what an author calls unattempted loveliness. The same ambition that drives us to build a new company also drives us to be materialistic and to exploit the same confidence that can lead to daring and creativity also can lead to self-worship and arrogance. We favor the short term over the long term, the lower over the higher.

People rarely commit the big sins out of the blue. They just walk through a series of doors. Small moral compromises on Monday make you more likely to commit other bigger moral compromises on Tuesday.

And this is the Biblical view of the world as it is. A complex view. Not only of people and individuals but of institutions, of families, our families, your family and my family, of businesses and of churches, our church, your church and my church and of nations as well. The only perfect nation is the Kingdom of God. The only perfect person is our Lord Jesus Christ. And I suspect that Joseph wove his way through all the different parts of his life knowing and understanding, and certainly experiencing the complexity of life, caught between the real and the ideal – between Heaven and Earth, between sin and salvation – caught in the middle. And it enabled him to serve this foreign nation, in his case Egypt, with all his heart and soul and mind, and with “energy, intelligence, imagination and love” – whether things were on the up or whether they were going down.

CHANGE. He knew that life was complex in the first place and he committed himself in the second place to change what he could; knowing that he couldn’t change everything; knowing that not everything would be redeemed, and knowing that even what we start may often crumble before too long that what we build up all of a sudden disappears (part of the message of the Book of Ecclesiastes), or becomes something other than our original intent. Joseph changed what he could when he could.

A thousand years later the prophet Jeremiah would encourage God’s people to do the same: to change what they could when and where they could. At the time, God’s ancient people were living again in a pagan country, another country, this time in exile in Babylon, not Egypt. When the people went into exile in Babylon a thousand years after they came out of slavery in Egypt, Jeremiah spoke to the people and told them to “*Seek the welfare of the nation to which God sends you*

for in its welfare you will find your own.” Change what you can wherever you can no matter who it is that you’re serving. There were people around Jeremiah who were saying “Don’t tell the people this. The Babylonians are a pagan people. Do nothing to help them.” But Jeremiah says “No, no, no! Change what you can where you can. God tells us to seek the welfare of the nation to which God sends us. Even if that nation seems compromised, do what you can to make the most of what you have.”

There may be a time when we’re in a bad situation which we can leave, and which we must leave. But there are other times when we cannot leave, but in which we can certainly do what we can where we can to make the most of what we have, whether we can see the ultimate conclusion of that work or not. The truth, of course, is that we never know the ultimate conclusion of our work. Whether it will last, collapse, or even backfire.

So, with Joseph. He begins by saving people’s lives, but then people become poor and sell themselves into slavery; but God uses even the slavery – during that time of slavery the Hebrew people grow in numbers and they become a nation. And although 400 years has to pass before they become a nation, in the end, after a great exodus of God’s people from Egypt, God’s own nation is formed – all starting with Joseph in a complex world, changing what he can for good and for God.

CALLING. And doing so in the third place as one called by God. God’s call in Joseph’s life was not a call to the ministry. It was not a call to become religious. It was not a call to become a minister like I am. One of the great parts of our heritage as Presbyterians is this understanding that God calls everyone who is a member of his family to use their gifts and talents – given to them by the Spirit of God -- as if they are employed by God. Joseph’s great employer was not ultimately the King of Egypt. Joseph’s great employer was ultimately God. And he worked hard and skillfully, whether as a slave, or in jail or for the pagan Egyptian king, because he was called by God to do so – a God who gave him energy no matter what happened to him.

Martin Luther King Junior speaks of God’s call like this: *“If a person is called to be a street sweeper he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of Heaven and Earth will pause to say here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.”*

No matter what it is, seemingly meaningful or insignificant, for God as a calling. He’s echoing actually the words of John Calvin our theological forefather who in the 1500s wrote this about God’s calling:

The Lord bids each one of us in all of life’s actions to look to his or her calling. For God knows with what great restlessness human nature flames, how its ambition longs to embrace various things at once. If we know that the Lord’s calling is in everything the beginning and foundation of well doing that even the

magistrate will discharge his functions more willingly. The head of household will confine himself to his duty. From this will arise also a singular consultation that no task will be so sordid and base provided you obey your calling in it that it will not shine and be reckoned very precious in God's sight. (*Institutes*, Bk3 Ch10 §6)

It doesn't matter whether you are in jail. It doesn't matter whether you're a slave. It doesn't matter whether you are doing something ordinary or spectacular and wonderful. We're not doing it for those who employ us; we're doing it ultimately for God – the one who calls every single one of us to use our gifts and our talents in God's service.

So here is this figure Joseph whose life takes all kinds of twists and turns under the sovereign sway of God. Sometimes powerless, sometimes powerful, and wherever we meet him he is working well, using his gifts wonderfully for others. And he does so over the long haul, through all the ups and downs of life. In all of this he could well have become cynical and lazy and found his energy flagging.

- He does so because he knows from the beginning that the world is complex. He is not naïve. The world is muddy, caught between sin and salvation, caught between the kingdoms of this world and the kingdom of God.
- In this world he knows that he is called to change what he can, and not what he cannot, and he focuses on what he can do, what is within his control and not what is beyond it.
- Above all, he knows that what he does he does for God, as one called by God.

May God help us keep those things in mind as we serve our families, as we serve our church and as we serve our nation. Let us bow before God in prayer.

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