

“Grief”

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St. Paul’s UCC Church

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Genesis 50:15-21

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of 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 have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

This is a really hard time. This COVID time. This global pandemic time. This time when life is not “as usual.” When we don’t have the routines we used to count on. When our kids can’t go back to school in the normal way, and miss their friends terribly. When we *ourselves* can’t see friends and loved ones like we used to. When jobs are unsettled. When we are afraid of contracting the virus, and have to be vigilant all the time. When we are afraid that the people we love will become sick, or die; when we are afraid we won’t be able to even see them before they go.

Someone described this time to me the other day as a time of great grief. It’s true, I think. In our own ways, and in our ways together, we are all grieving. Grieving for everything we are missing, grieving for everything that has changed.

Today, we enter into the world of Joseph and his brothers, from the book of Genesis. Do you remember this story?

Remember poor Joseph, way back in earlier chapters of Genesis, years before our story today? When he is a young boy, Joseph – who has eleven brothers and one sister, Dinah – seems to be his father’s favorite. Well, this makes his brothers so mad that they end up selling him into slavery in Egypt. But while he’s in Egypt, things start to look up for Joseph. He becomes wildly successful as a dream interpreter for Pharaoh. He’s so successful, in fact, that he is eventually made second-in-command, with only Pharaoh above him.

While in Pharaoh’s palace, Joseph has a dream that causes him to predict seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. Joseph tells his dream, and its

interpretation, to the Pharaoh, who then wisely stores up tons of grain. And, after seven years, a severe famine comes, just as Joseph had predicted; and, because of Joseph, Egypt is the only country that has enough food to feed its people.

Meanwhile, in the land of Canaan, Joseph's family is starving. They hear word of the plenteous food in Egypt, and Jacob sends his sons – Joseph's brothers – to Pharaoh's palace to see if they can buy some of Egypt's grain. Once his brothers get to the palace, Joseph knows immediately who they are, but his brothers don't recognize him. In a complete reversal of power, the brothers now grovel before Joseph, begging for food.

In a beautiful and moving encounter of reconciliation, a weeping Joseph forgives his brothers, as he invites all of them, including his father, to move down to Egypt, and to live next to him, so that he can provide for them. He then falls upon his brothers, weeping once again. "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good."

When I was in third grade, my family and I moved from Kansas to South Carolina. And third grade was not like second grade for me. I struggled to make friends in third grade. There were mean girls in my class. I missed Kansas, and often felt sad and alone.

One Sunday, my family and I all went to church, and I remember hearing the pastor preach on this very story – the story of Joseph. I remember him honing in on that last part: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." And in third grade, in the midst of trying to deal with my grief about missing Kansas and those pesky mean girls in South Carolina, this is how I heard these words: *Don't worry if things are terrible now. God has a plan. It will be okay.*

Now, I had two reactions to this at the time; I still remember this quite clearly. One was positive, reassuring, something like, "It really is okay. Even though things are hard, it's going to be fine, because God is at work and God will turn this hard stuff into something good." But other reaction was more negative, one where I heard something like: "You feel sad and angry. But you shouldn't. Because God has a plan. So you need to be more trusting. You need to be more faithful." In other words, I heard something like, "Get over yourself. Buck up. Stop your crying, and trust in the Lord."

"I'm mixed up." That is what my daughter Ellie used to say when she was feeling more than one thing at a time. Do you ever feel like that? Mixed up, where you do find comfort in God's plan, but, at the same time, you also feel like you have to "get over" your sadness, your grief, your anxiety, anger, frustration, whatever. That if you really had faith, you'd buck up, and stop your crying. Maybe a loved one dies, and someone

says to you, “Don’t be sad. They’re in a much better place.” Or maybe you’re going through depression, and someone says, “God is with you. If you just believe that, you’ll feel better.” Or, you are living through a global pandemic, and a friend offers, “God has a plan. This too shall pass.”

Now, these kind of statements create mixed feelings, don’t you think? They do for me, at least. I mean, there is some comfort in the words – and I believe with all my heart that the person speaking the words is just wanting to be comforting – but still, if you’re like me, there’s also this element of guilt, or something like guilt. Like, if you could just trust more, you wouldn’t feel the way you feel, which is bad. *You feel bad*. Probably, you are grieving.

And it’s a mixed-up, confusing place to be.

I’m looking again at our text. At Joseph’s story. One of the elements I missed when I was younger was all the crying that goes on in this story. I mean, people are in tears all over the place here! They are crying. They are wailing. They are really letting ‘er rip.

In our story today, Joseph weeps when his brothers ask for forgiveness. And then his brothers weep when they see him weeping. Everyone is falling all over themselves, just *wailing*.

What’s the deal with all this crying? Isn’t it kind of, I dunno, unmanly of Joseph and his brothers to cry like little babies?

It’s hard to live in our culture, sometimes. We live in a quick-fix culture, a microwave culture. We live in a culture where we are often told – in subtle ways and not so subtle ones – that we need to get over our grief, get over our tears. We are told that there is a time line for grieving and we’d better get through it, move on, stop our wallowing. We are told that too much crying is weak. But I look at Joseph today, all he’s gone through, and how much he cries, and I have to wonder: is it really weak to cry? Or is Joseph just being more honest than the rest of us?

When bad things happen, when I’m in pain, when I’m mixed up, when I’m sad, I sometimes hear confusing messages about my feelings. I hear: *It’s going to be okay, because God’s got this*, which is comforting. But in the same breath, I also hear: *God’s got this, so... buck up. Get over yourself. Quit your crying*. I wonder if I could be more like Joseph. I wonder if I could be more honest. To cry, to weep even, when things are hard, and to not be too embarrassed about it. I wonder if a lot of my “mixed-up-ness” comes from bottling up my emotions, trying to control them, trying to seem strong, or trusting, or “okay.”

But what if, when things are hard, when I’m in pain, what if I just *wept*?

I’ve heard people talk about “holy tears.” I wonder if I – if we – need more holy tears in our life. Especially these days. I wonder if we need holy tears that tell the truth

about our pain. Holy tears that mean we're hurt, that things are actually not entirely okay. Holy tears that tell us we are living through a global pandemic, that the world is turned upside down, and there is *so much* to grieve about that. Holy tears that cleanse us, holy tears that baptize us. Holy tears that remind us we're not in control, that there is a God, who doesn't judge us, who doesn't tell us we need to buck up or believe more. I wonder if these holy tears could be the *very reminder* that God is holding us through everything – the confusion, the pain, the weeping, the being mixed up, all of it.

I wonder if our holy tears – our deep grief – might be a signal to us. A sign. A sign that God is near.

What would that be like? If we were more like weeping Joseph, more like his brothers? And just let 'er rip?

Thanks be to God.