

Do We Still Matter?
Genesis 45:1-15; Romans 11:1-2a, 29-32

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Joseph. Good old Joseph. The last time we saw Joseph, he was 17 years old. His brothers had just sold him to some slave traders going to Egypt. In Egypt, he was sold to an important man and for a while, things went well. Joseph was put in charge of all the man's household. But then, he was falsely accused of a crime and thrown in jail.

Once again, things went well. Before long, Joseph was put in charge of the jail. He began interpreting dreams for his fellow prisoners. Eventually, he was brought before Pharaoh and interpreted Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph interpreted that there would be seven years of plentiful harvest. More food than anyone could eat. Then, there would be seven years of famine. No crops at all. Everyone would have to live on what they had stored. Pharaoh was so impressed he put Joseph in charge of preparing all Egypt for this time of famine.

In today's lesson, nine years have passed since that interview with Pharaoh, seven years of abundance and two years of famine. Joseph is almost 40 years old. He has spent over half his life in Egypt. Despite the ups and downs, Joseph has risen in power and wealth. He is responsible for feeding all of Egypt and the people from neighboring countries who come to buy food. In Egypt, Joseph is second only to Pharaoh himself.

And look, here are his brothers. Desperately seeking food for themselves and their families. What is Joseph going to do?

If you're not familiar with the story I recommend you go back and read the previous chapter. Joseph jerks their chains pretty hard. But - he doesn't kill them. He doesn't sell them into slavery. He does them no physical harm. Instead, Joseph cares for them.

Would we do that? Would we do that? Think back to the times you've been betrayed and how you responded. If you were in Joseph's shoes, would you do that? It would be hard, wouldn't it?

And why should we? Why should we forgive anyone? Why should we do good to those who hurt us? Because that's what Grandma taught us to do? Because someone said nice is nice?

No. We Christians have a better reason. We Christians know life is best, life is most meaningful, life is most fulfilling, when we are living like God. As Christians we know our greatest calling is living like God. And how does God live? What does God like? God likes mercy. God likes forgiveness. God likes reconciliation.

¹³Go and learn what this means, "I desire mercy, not sacrifice." For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.' (Matthew 9:13)

⁴³'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy." ⁴⁴But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. (Matthew 5:43-45)

³⁴Then Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.' (Luke 23:34a)

Our God is a God of forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation. And our calling, our best life, is living like God.

Is it hard? Yes, of course. And maybe it's not realistic. Maybe it's beyond us mortals to fully realize this level of forgiveness.

Maybe we can't be as forgiving as God, but we can learn to put aside our pain and our hurt and work for the good of the other person. Look again at Joseph. He doesn't tell his brothers, "Here's your food. See you next year and be sure to bring a lot more money with you." No. He moves them to be near him so he can care for them.

I could end this sermon with an exhortation to be like God and practice forgiveness, not a bad idea, but let me push the envelope a bit. Let me close with two observations and a reflection.

First of all, the influence and role of religion in America is declining. Not just for Christians but for all faiths. This is well documented and was happening long before Covid. Covid only accelerated the process. The importance of religion in America is in serious decline.

Recently, I was privileged to give the opening prayer for Bremenfest. And I was glad to do it. Not a problem. I got there early. Met the man in charge. He said I would be on right after the raising of the Flag and the National Anthem. OK. Sure. When the time was right, a young lady invited us all to join her in singing the National Anthem. It was magic. Everyone stood and faced the flag. Hands over hearts. If you weren't singing you were standing in respectful silence. Everyone seemed to take it very seriously.

Then, I was called up to pray and suddenly the dam burst. There was more noise than a freight train going by. I'm praying for God's mercy and thanks for our community, while everyone else is laughing and talking and walking around. Little kids are darting here and there. Obviously, the Flag was much, much more important than God. Understand, I'm not saying we're bad people. It would have been the same anywhere. I'm sure of it. But it was a clear sign religion is much less important than it used to be.

My second observation is in the last decade or so, America has become mean. Our country, our culture, has become mean. Fistfights on airplanes, for crying out loud. School Board meetings turning into shouting matches. Road rage. Mass shootings. One reason there's a pastor shortage today is a lot of pastors quit during Covid. They got tired of their congregations fighting each other over mask mandates.

I don't know that there is a correlation between the decline of religion and the rise of anger and meanness. I can't say the decline of religion has necessarily made us more hateful and cruel.

But I can say, and this is my reflection, I can say for sure and for certain our country would be a lot better off if more of us were like Joseph. Our country would be a lot better off if more of us were like Jesus. Our country would be a lot, a lot better off if more of us made a point of trying to be merciful like God.

Friends, our country needs what we have. Our country needs our examples of forgiveness and mercy. Our country desperately, desperately needs living examples of love and reconciliation. Our country needs us to model it, preach it, do it. Our country needs us to share the message we worship a God of mercy. We worship a God who can help us live together in peace.

Will anyone sit up and take notice? Maybe. Maybe not. That's not our call. Remember what Paul says to young Timothy.

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I solemnly urge you: ²proclaim the message; be persistent whether the time is favorable or unfavorable; convince, rebuke, and encourage, with the utmost patience in teaching. 2 Timothy 4:1-2

It's called Nike ministry. Just do it!

Sometimes I wonder, when I'm reading my Bible, does Joseph matter anymore? Does Christianity matter anymore? Does the world need what we have? Do we matter?

Every time I listen to the news I say, yes. Yes. We matter. Our country, our world, needs our good news. By our words and our actions, in season and out of season, let us boldly proclaim we can forgive each other. By God's grace we can live in peace and respect for each other. We can care for those who have hurt us. By God's grace, we don't have to be mean.

Thanks be to God! Amen.