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Genesis 45:1-15
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In my view, this passage is really the theological zenith, perhaps not just to the Old Testament but maybe the whole Bible. I can't think of any story that's more touching, more profound, that reveals more of the heart and activity of God and the world.

Joseph's brothers are hungry because there is a famine, and they are forced to go to Egypt, and as it turns out, the person who is in charge of the food supply is their long-lost brother, Joseph. They don't recognize him. They sold him into slavery so many years before. They assumed that he was a goner.

And they come before him, and he says to them, "I am Joseph, your brother." And they understand, and we begin to tremble in fear because we expect that he would do what you and I probably would do, which would be, "Send them off to the stockade, they shall be punished for their misdeeds."

But instead, Joseph says, "Do not be afraid." And then he says something that's too remarkable for words. He says, "It was not you who sent me here." Well, of course, they sent him there. He says, "It was not you who sent me here, but it was God. God sent me here to preserve life. You've meant evil against me, but God meant it for good."

So moving. And they fell on each other's shoulders and they wept. Lovely story. And it's one that I've preached and taught on many times. I don't keep old sermons, but I did a computer search toward deleted files, and I found 8 sermons in my old computer that I preached on this over time, and I'm sure before the computer era there were others that I wrote out by hand. They're now gone.

It's a lovely passage, and as I thought about it this week, I discovered once again the richness of Scripture. No matter how many times we look at a passage, it is a well that is deep and never runs dry.

I thought about this passage, and I thought of some questions that I'd like to ask. I thought of a question that I'd like to ask to Joseph if I could. I would like to ask Joseph, Why, since you're bound to have been smart enough to know that your brothers were hungry back in Palestine, why didn't you just package up some food and send it to them? You could have done that anonymously. You could have gotten a chariot squadron to deliver it for you personally. Or once the brothers showed up, you could have just given them the bread and sent them on their way and never said I am your brother. Why didn't you just give them some bread?

How do you think Joseph's answer would be? I didn't want them just to have bread; I wanted to restore our broken relationship. I wanted my family back. Hmm?

We remind you often that John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, said, "It is better to deliver aid than to send it. It is better to deliver aid than to send it."

I sometimes harp on this thing. I probably won't need to again, because after I tell you this, you won't do the following ever again. Sometimes, it's often around Thanksgiving, one of you shows up and you say, "Hey, at our office they gave us this ham, and I'd like you to take this ham to some poor person who's hungry." And on my bad days I say, "Thank you so much for the generous gift of your ham." But on my better days, I'll say to you, "I'm not taking it to a poor person, but you can take it to a poor person. Or even better, find a poor person, invite them to your home and eat the ham together there."

You see, when we talk about this, it's not like some great, brilliant mission initiative. When we deliver aid, instead of sending it, we mimic God. God could have just logged aid for us down from Heaven. God could just give you a lot of stuff, and oh, you'd have a lot of stuff. Like those brothers, you would have some bread back home and you wouldn't have to make the journey. But God wants a relationship. God wants the restoration of his family. In fact, the gift that God gives is not any thing. The gift that God gives is God's own self. And it's the gift that we really need, that we're really hungry for. It's no mere thing. It's not just bread. We are hungry in the depths of our soul for God.

There's a question that I'd love to ask of the brothers, and it would be this: Aren't you glad that Joseph didn't just send aid down there with some chariots, but that he made you come. And I think the brothers would say, "Oh yes, we're so glad that he made us come. We could have just had some bread back home, but because we came, we restored our family. We made peace. We had been riddled with that nagging guilt with the sense of not being very good people long enough." And Joseph forgave and we made peace, and we discovered the hope that is God. And we have to think about this for ourselves. Sometimes we have sort of a Santa Claus view of God. You know, Santa Claus brings you stuff, but you never quite see him, do you? He's up there on the roof and he's down the chimney, and then he's gone before you know it. Then you got the stuff, and you're so glad to have the stuff.

Well, you do see Santa Claus once a year now, don't you? It's when you go before Christmas and you climb in his lap and you give him the list of the things that you want. And sometimes we think this is what we want from God. We'll give him the list and he'll just shower the stuff down on us. But that won't do, will it? That's not enough, is it? We want the relationship. We want the family. We want to discover that God is our brother. And until we reconcile with each other, none of us is freed, none of us is ever at peace.

The Sunday after the Civil War ended at the Old St. John's Church in Richmond, Va., the city was reduced to rubble, the worshipers gathered and the priests, Dr. Charles Minnegerode stood up and he invited the communicants to come forward to receive the Holy Communion. The crowd was stunned. They were just beginning to get out of their seats when suddenly the first person who came forward was a tall, black man, his name lost to the annals of history, who came forward. Well, polite, white, affluent Richmonders were stunned by this because they knew that blacks were in the church, but they were supposed to come last, perhaps after the whites had already received it and had already gone home. And here was this man, such importunity coming directly to the altar, and they began to think among themselves, "What shall we do?" The poor minister, he wasn't sure what he would do either. Shall we just bolt and go home?

But they did not go home because there was a white man in an old gray coat, he had a gray beard. Everyone in the room knew him. He was aged much by what had transpired over the past few years. He stood up from his seat and slowly but deliberately came forward and knelt next to the black man at the altar. The white man's name was Robert E. Lee.

You see, until we kneel together at God's altar, until we reconcile with one another, none of us is ever truly free.

There's a question when I think about this story, the one I ask of us. You see, in those days, they had hard times. There was a famine in the land, and if there had not been a famine, those brothers would never have come to Egypt and they would never have rediscovered their brother. They would never have had their relationships restored had there not been a famine. The question that I have for us is, Can't we see how hard times become our opportunity for healing?

We're in what seems like a tough economic time, and people grouse about the price of gas. Many people are fearful for their jobs. These are hard times. These are fearful times. But let me suggest to you that it's a great opportunity for us to learn again, what it is to be dependant upon God. To learn again what it means to make peace with someone with whom we have not been at peace. The hard times can be a great opportunity for healing.

The last question that I'd like to ask would be of Jesus himself. Jesus' earthly father, you know, was named Joseph. And I'd love to ask Jesus, "When you saw your father, Joseph, did you ever remember the Joseph from the Old Testament? In fact, when you were a little boy and you and your siblings were perhaps squabbling over a toy or who was going to get first dibs on ice cream ..." Did they have ice cream back then? We need to research this. "That when you were doing that, did Joseph, your earthly father, function as Joseph in the Old Testament, the one who made peace among brothers? On that last night of your life, Jesus, when you gathered your friends there at that table with you and they were so confused. They had no clue why you had come to Earth, they wanted you to turn stones into bread so that their bellies could be full and so that they could have power and so that everything would go well for them and they were elbowing each other for position at the table Jesus, why did you not say, "Be gone with you? You're so confused. I've been with you all this time, can't you do any better?" Were you thinking of Joseph when you said to them, "I am your brother?" You mean evil against me, or you just don't understand or you're just confused or you just ignore me, but I am Jesus, your brother. God sent me here so that there could be life."

Today we come as very hungry people in tough times. And we're confused. We don't get God. We're not a tenth as devoted to God as we ought to be, and we may tremble in fear when we think about the Holy God. But the Holy God did not send aid. The Holy God delivered aid in the person of His son, Jesus. He comes down and to us he says, "I am your brother."

Here at my table there is forgiveness. There is hope. We discerned the hidden hand of God and we discover how to join hand with each other, to kneel together, to be reconciled.

Jesus, our brother, the bread come down from Heaven. Thanks be to God.