

“Come Closer to Me”

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One struggle I have with the Lectionary — where this comes — is that you only get a snippet. I can understand that, because I would be reading for the next hour and a half, if I did the whole story from Joseph in the Bible. In order to understand this, I want to go back and re-tell the story and, in order to do that, you can't just start with Joseph's birth, you actually have to go back to his parents to lead in.

Now, Joseph's father was Jacob, of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's fame, and Jacob was a cunning, manipulative man. He was faithful because God loved him, but he was unfaithful at moments, and God worked all things for good. Jacob went so far — this is Joseph's dad — and Jacob went so far as to manipulate his brother, Esau, out of his inheritance. He was mean and manipulative to his own brother, so it wasn't a surprise that Jacob's sons grew up being feisty and manipulative with each other. They learned from the champion: they learned from their own father.

Now, Jacob, when he started his own family, worked for seven years because he wanted to have Rachel as his wife. (This is Joseph's dad.) Jacob worked for seven years and his wife's-to-be father's name was Laban. He [Jacob] worked for those seven years and he wanted Rachel. At the end of the seven years, Rachel's father said, “No. I have changed my mind. You get Leah.”

And, Jacob said, “I worked seven years.” And he [Laban] said, “Take it or leave it.”

So Jacob said, “Alright. *But* if I work another seven, can I have Rachel?” So Rachel's father said, “OK.”

“But,” Jacob said, “I want her now and I will work those seven years.” And he and Laban came to an agreement. So, he was a slave, in essence, to his father-in-law for 14 years; and, because of the manipulation between Laban and Jacob, he [Jacob] loved Rachel, and there was always a sense of bitterness toward Leah, because he had been forced to marry her.

Now it progresses. They ended up having their children. The problem is that Leah — whom he was never particularly fond of — was fertile Myrtle. [Laughter.] That woman could have more babies than anyone thought imaginable. She had a bunch — a whole vineyard full.

Then you have Rachel. How frustrating it must have been, because time went by and she couldn't conceive a child. Now, that would be painful enough today, but you go back thousands upon thousands of years ago, and the definition of who a woman was — her very respect in the essence of who she was — was bound up in how many children, and especially male babies, she had.

Leah had done her wifely duty. She had fulfilled everything of what it meant to be a woman. She cranked out boys left and right and, yet, she couldn't get the respect of her husband, who wanted Rachel to have those babies.

Finally, the day came. Rachel was pregnant and she had her firstborn son, and his name was Joseph. Well, all of a sudden, the stars aligned and the whole universe is in perfect order, because now his beloved – his real beloved – Rachel, had a son. So, he doted on this son and didn't pay a whole lot of attention to all of the other boys, because they were Leah's.

What do you think would happen? You had some bitter boys over here, that are Leah's sons, and, rightfully so. They couldn't get their dad's affection, the same way their mother couldn't get the affection of her husband and, all of a sudden, one boy was born. He wasn't particularly great in any way — and he gets all of the attention.

They grow up and you have mothers fighting wives, fighting over the attention of the husband. The children are watching this, and developing this same type of dysfunction by watching them; and, they are feeling like second-class citizens because they never got the attention they felt they should have.

You know the Bible isn't that weird. It is so true to how many of our families struggle with those same emotions. If you have ever felt that you weren't the respected child; if you weren't the one that mom and dad *really* loved as much as the other one; man, this is the story. Some things are the same all the way through.

And so, it finally comes to a head. I mean Joseph fulfilled his father. He was a little brat because, how could you not be when you could lord it over your brothers? And, your father, no matter what you did; thought you were perfect. He [Joseph] could dream dreams and do some other things that were pretty exciting, which made the brothers even angrier, until one point in time the brothers and Joseph went off — and the boys had a scheme.

They were going to kill Joseph, and tell their father that he was torn up by animals. Then they wouldn't have to put up with him anymore, and they would get more of the affection, and attention, and respect that was due them. Then they thought, "No. We really can't do that; so we will just throw him in this pit and let him die, and then it's God's will. We will still tell dad that Joseph died that way."

All of a sudden, God intervened and off in the distance there was an Ishmaelite slave caravan going along. They [the brothers] thought, "Why are we just throwing him in this pit to die and we don't get anything; when we can sell him to the Ishmaelites as a slave, and then we get 20 pieces of silver? Brilliant! And, we can split it." So they did.

Joseph crawls out of the pit, with the help of his brothers. He was sold into a life of misery. "And, isn't that better," the brothers thought, "because the only thing worse than death is being a slave. He will be abused his entire life. HA, HA, HA." So it went.

But God kept intervening. Now, just because God watches over Joseph, doesn't mean that his life is easy. So, just because God watches over you and me, doesn't mean that it is going to be easy for us either, apparently.

Because now Joseph is purchased by a man named Potiphar, and Potiphar needed an administrator. He found out that Joseph, low and behold, was educated. Joseph had abilities. He could administrate. He could count. He could use numbers and other things. He

could run a household and run its slaves, and its animals, and everything else. He [Potiphar] really trusted in Joseph and Joseph had integrity. Everything was going well.

Joseph only had one problem: He was young and he was good looking; and, believe me I know that is not an easy thing to do. [Laughter.] (I shouldn't say that when Jill is behind me.) [Laughter.] The struggle was that Potiphar, I'm guessing, was a little dotty and a little older — kind of like I am now.

All of a sudden, Potiphar's wife was going, "That is a good-looking slave." And, she made a move on him. Joseph was darned if he did, and darned if he didn't. If he did it, he was going to end up being at odds with her husband — the owner — and he would lose his integrity. But, if he didn't, he knew she would lay him out and she could have him killed.

If you were going to be "darned if you did and darned if you don't," you might as well keep your integrity. So, he said, "No, I won't."

Sure enough, she went to her husband and made false accusations. But rather than kill him, Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison.

Here again, God intervened. God decided to take Joseph and encourage Joseph, even in the prison; and, Joseph, to his credit, and showing the amount of integrity that he had, went so far as to make the best out of the life he had been given.

So, even in prison, Joseph would continue to dream his dreams and interpret them for the other prisoners. He helped them and they respected him for it. They took care of him. They treated him well, which meant he survived in prison.

Yet again, God intervened — intervenes in the most remarkable way. God places horrible dreams upon Pharaoh — horrible, frightening — lord only knows, what kind of mental dysfunction was going on in Pharaoh's brain, over these dreams. They were so bad, he didn't even want to go to sleep. He couldn't function. And, then you know how crazy you get when you are sleep deprived. Over and over and over again it happened.

Finally, when he [Pharaoh] is at his wits' end, he brings in his own people — his own religious people — to cast out whatever demons, or whatever else is going on. No one could help.

And, all of a sudden, one day one of the servants had a relative who worked at the prison, who said, "Oh, yeah. Hey, there was this guy there and he interpreted dreams."

The servant told this to Pharaoh, and he said, "What the heck! I don't care. I'm desperate."

So, all of a sudden, here is Joseph, from the backwater of the world, who had been betrayed by his brothers, who had been thrown into slavery, who had been manipulated and ends up in prison in a dirty cell. You think prisons are bad now — imagine thousands of years ago.

And, suddenly, one day, he goes from that prison cell — filthy, in rags — and he stands before the most powerful person in the entire world, and in the most amazing, wealthiest

gold-strewn, beautiful place in the history of the world, up to that point. He stands there, before that Pharaoh, and Pharaoh begs him to help him. And Joseph said, “I will.”

Joseph listens and interprets Pharaoh’s dream and, again, God intervened. God gives Joseph the answers and Pharaoh is healed.

Now, Pharaoh is so thrilled he wants to keep Joseph, and wants to bless Joseph, because Joseph was the only one in the entire world who could help Pharaoh. He brings Joseph in. He finds out his history. Pharaoh finds out Joseph isn’t just an interpreter, but an administrator, and Pharaoh makes Joseph one of the wealthiest men in the world; places him right under Pharaoh, gives him the ability to administrate and care, because he knows Pharaoh’s deepest darkest secrets anyway, and so he gives him everything at his feet. Wow!

One of the things that Joseph interpreted for Pharaoh was the famine. He tells Pharaoh, “You need to save all of the grain. You need to build more bins of grain, because you are going to have seven years of famine. Your people are going to come to you, starving, and you had better have enough, or you will be overthrown.”

And, sure enough, the famine came — one year, two years — and Joseph waited. Pharaoh applauds him, because he was right again; and, Joseph knew that, if he waited long enough, he would start to see the people come, in their starvation, come to him for food. And, Joseph knew that, sooner or later, his brothers would be among the starving.

One day he sits upon his throne. He looks down at everyone through that line that came, going to the grain bins, asking their permission, and here came those brothers. (Now you can’t tell me that there wasn’t a moment where vengeance didn’t enter into his mind.) But, God interceded and gave Joseph a better idea: First, he points them out, with the kind of trickery that Jacob had for his brother, Esau, his son, Joseph, had with his brothers. He calls them in and he brings them together, and accuses them of spying.

And, they said, “Oh, no. We aren’t spies.”

And, he said, “How can you prove it?”

“Well,” they said, “we didn’t.”

So, Joseph said, “I know how you can prove it. I will take one of you and put you in prison, and send you back to your father, and I want you to bring your youngest brother back with you. Then I will know and I will be able to find out if you are spies, or if you are who you say you are.”

They didn’t want to go back, a.) Because they were starving, and b.) They were scared to death that they would have to do something. What were they going to say? How would they talk their dad into giving yet another brother, when one was already in prison?

They couldn’t do it any longer, and they are waiting and taking their time. Joseph is getting impatient, so he makes sure and stashes food in their bags. But then, the brothers were really scared. Rather than making it comfortable, knowing they are going to be fed, “Why is this ruler of Egypt paying so much attention to us? Why is he giving us anything?”

Now they are really paranoid. So, they go back to their father, Jacob, and they tell him about this ruler; and, that they have one brother in jail and they need Benjamin. Benjamin was the younger son of Rachel.

So, now these boys — who were Leah's boys — have to talk their father into giving the last of Rachel's sons. One they have already killed. (You can't tell me Jacob didn't wonder), and now they are asking for the other Rachel boy.

Jacob relents and lets Benjamin go; but Joseph has more up his sleeve. On the caravan, on the way back, Joseph has one of his people — a real spy — sneak in with the fanciest goblet of Pharaoh's, and stuffs it in Benjamin's bag, without him knowing it.

Now, that is a pick pocket. And, sure enough, he comes and stops the caravan, and says, "You are thieves." And they said, "No. We have done nothing. We haven't been around anybody."

And, he said, "Let me see your things."

They said, "We didn't. If we did, you can kill the one of us that you find anything on, and the rest of us you can throw into slavery."

And, sure enough, he walks up, he checks the bags and looks at Benjamin, the youngest son of Rachel's, and there is the goblet. Now, the brothers know that Benjamin is going to die. His father will never forgive them and they will go into slavery. They go dragging back to the administrator and they look up at him, ready to be pronounced — death and slavery.

And then, I started to read, "He falls down. He cries and he kisses them. He forgives them."

The end.

Except, the story really burns my backside. Why in the world do you just forgive? I struggle with it over and over again because, let me play out a quick, little scenario: I really hate cheap forgiveness, like Dietrich Bonhoeffer's with his cheap grace. I really hate cheap forgiveness, because what if there is a woman or man, for that matter, a spouse who has been abused and that person goes to the minister, or the priest, or the rabbi, and says, "I'm being abused." And, they say, "Shouldn't you forgive? Well, Jesus said, 'you should forgive seventy times seven,' now go home to your spouse and forgive them, and hope they don't do it again. You should be forgiving."

Well, what I tell you is, if you do that, you are going to allow that poor person to be abused seventy times seven more. It doesn't work.

Then I calm down and I realize, "Wait a minute. What did this story actually say?" That is why Joseph tricked the brothers, called them spies, manipulated them, sent them home. Because, after he got done kissing and hugging them, he sent them back and told them to go to their father and to bring the family back, where he could watch them.

What did they have to do? They had to go back now and tell their father everything.

“How is it that this son of mine, that you said was torn up by animals, is now alive?”

“Well, we sold him into slavery.”

Now, there is accountability. Joseph did all of that so there would be accountability. They would have to own up to what they did. In other words, they would have to admit — confess — their sin. They would have to repent of their sins and *then* they receive forgiveness. Joseph didn't do it as cheap forgiveness. He figured out a way for them to confess — to repent — and then be reconciled.

The way to get closer in their relationship is what we do every Sunday morning. We confess. We receive the Declaration of Pardon and we receive God's blessing. I don't think God ever meant for us to get abused over and over again. It takes the change in the power dynamic.

If Joseph had remained the slave, I don't think he would have ever been able to forgive his brothers; but now that they could no longer hurt him, because he was up with all of that money — *he* was the one with authority, *he* could go through that process, have that forgiveness and that reconciliation — that accountability. And then, then he could forgive them without being worried that they would have ability to hurt him again.

It is our task to figure out ways to bring about forgiveness that isn't cheap, that won't hurt us again, that will allow us to find restoration. It's a big, long story — but that is where the happy ending happens: When God intercedes, real change — not further abuse — takes place now and always.

Amen.