February 24th – 10:30am

Springfield Presbyterian Church

**From Slavery to Freedom**

I. Background on Joseph

When we hear the text this morning from the book of Genesis about this beautiful family reunion in the house of Jacob, it provides a sense of warmth. It makes Joseph look like the hero and the victim, who arises from the depths of slavery and is granted freedom because of his capacity to help Pharoah with his dreams. Yet if I left you there, if I left you in this passage alone, I would be doing you a great disservice. The brothers had their reasons to be mad at Joseph and vis-versa. And even if you know the story of Joseph well or not at all, it’s important to have a quick catch-up recap of what comes before this passage of reconciliation.

Joseph is the first-born son of Jacob and Rachel, and the youngest child of his ten half-brothers. Jacob loves Joseph best, he favours him greatly, and he gives him that coat of many colours you’ve probably heard about. Joseph, around age sixteen or so, give or take, has two dreams, and the essence is – his brothers and father and mother are bowing to him, showing honour and respect. And then Joseph does something we know is not going to go well – he tells his brothers and his brothers are angry to say the least.

And to be fair to the brothers, lets take a modern sidebar – I’m the youngest of my family and if I were to go up to my brother and sister and tell them this dream, no matter the age, they would show me the door. And I imagine, whether you have siblings or not, if you were to tell your boss, your mentor, your parents, whomever this dream and that the dream should come to fruition – it’s not going to go well for you.

And whether or not Joseph’s dream is a real vision or prophecy, he comes off looking pretty arrogant. He is naïve, he is young, and his angered brothers are banding together to find a way to get him off of dad’s land – some brothers want to kill him, some want to sell him off, one brother wants to put him in a cistern. They need to get rid of him for them to live peaceably, so Joseph gets sold off into slavery and imprisoned.

Now, I’m not going to go through Genesis 37-45, but a lot of things happen – from Joseph being accused of rape and imprisoned, from Pharaoh calling on Joseph for some help with a dream, to a tussle back and forth of misdeeds and revelations for both sides – for Joseph and the brothers. And then, as we hear in the passage today, a culminating moment, where the brothers and Joseph see each other for who they are and turn a major corner in their relationships.

II. What Does Slavery Look Like

When we talk about slavery, one often thinks of the terrible misdeeds and mistreatment in our modern society as we reflect on a history that is not too removed – the slavery of black individuals by white owners. We might consider the continued oppression and slavery of a system that still demonizes by race, age, gender, sexual identity, or otherwise. Slavery is usually spoken about through identity.

And to some extent, I speak about the slavery of Joseph in very tangible ways today – he was enslaved, and he was imprisoned. Yet, there’s another kind of slavery that is important to delve into – the slavery that exists beyond any identifying marks on us, but rather lies within.

There is slavery to thought – to being captured by hatred, anger, a feeling of anguish, -- an emotion that holds down the tension in your body so tightly that you feel you cannot escape. Joseph was not only enslaved physically, but he was enslaved psychologically. He had, what psychiatrists would probably call ‘psychological growth’ during all of these trials and tribulations we hear about in the preceding chapters of our text today. He has to wrestle with himself – with the pain of his actions committed to his brothers and his brother’s actions that hurt him. He had to live with the fact that he made himself superior and made his brothers less – and the fact that whether or not that is prophecy – that that hurt his brother’s and their relationship and frayed the family at the seams. He had to wrestle with the teenage boy he was and the man he was going to be and how, his physical freedom would be just as important as his psychological freedom.

The brothers also had their own psychological dance to get through – they were the ones who nearly killed their brother, who enslaved their brother and as they grow older together in body and spirit, that feeling takes grip on their souls. Joseph may have well deserved to be thrown into slavery for being arrogant and superior, but the brothers also feel the ache of losing this brother and what they chose to do. They had to live with the consequences. They struggled, they went back and forth to Egypt and they assumed their brother was dead, for Joseph had taken on another name. They needed psychological freedom too.

III. The Culminating Moment

And then the moment that brings us here today – the text that speaks of reconciliation. If we are again to read the text alone, Joseph looks like the hero, but we see throughout the preceding chapters that there’s a whole other story at play – both groups are at fault, both have had to learn and change and grow. Both parties may have believed that they would have never even made it to this moment, but Joseph approaches the brothers and says his name and asks if their dad is still alive.

The brothers, now grown, are dismayed, in shock – the brother they thought was dead, the brother they enslaved, the brother who did not treat them well is right here in front of them. They are paralyzed. Yet the moment comes, Joseph tells the brothers that he isn’t angry anymore, and that there was a purpose and a place for all of this stuff that both parties had to go through - to grow and become the people they were called to be by God. Joseph shares that the family will reunite, that all will be provided for, and he kissed his brothers and they talked for the first time in years.

IV. Stepping into Freedom

Joseph still takes on the role of the superior – the provider, but the emphasis has changed. As he has grown, he has the role and the privilege and responsibility to take care of his brothers. He could have chosen to smite them, but he says he will provide for them – for their children’s children. Joseph chose freedom, in all senses of the word.

The brothers, paralyzed by their own fear, perhaps by their previous choices, have grown too. They see a change in Joseph and they feel a change within themselves. The brother that they saw as arrogant has become a provider. The brothers themselves might not deserve to be provided for, but they come together, and for the time being – for the here and now – they become free, in all senses of the word.

V. An Invitation to Freedom

Perhaps you’ve made mistakes. Perhaps you’ve asserted your authority over someone else in a way you shouldn’t have, maybe you’ve made decisions for money rather than for people, and chances are you’ve held onto bitterness or anger for much longer than you’ve needed to – whether that anger was fully rationalized or not. I have too – and that is the plight of being human and fallible and the realization that in some way – whether systems en slave us or not, we often enslave ourselves. Call it self-sabotage, call it whatever it may be – but in the here and now, we continue to grow, we continue to learn, we continue to say we do not understand the trials and tribulations of life, but perhaps there’s something to learn from them.

I invite you, I invite myself, I invite us all to freedom – the freedom of knowing that we as fallible creatures continue to grow and learn all our lives and in that freedom, we continue to become the people God has called us to be. May you know the Christ who takes off the shackles of shame and doubt and know the Christ who calls you beloved and free. Amen.

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