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Joseph & Why the World Needs a Church Like Plymouth

I love the way some people have names which perfectly fit them. Like the gifted and organized wedding planner we sometimes work with here at Plymouth, Tiara. Yes, that's right, when she was born the doctor presented her saying, "look, it's a wedding planner." And so, they had to crown her Tiara.

While I love stories of "perfect names," I'm also deeply drawn to the song we sang during the scripture lesson. We sang God's promise:

*I will change your name,
You shall no longer be called
Wounded, outcast, lonely, or afraid.*

*I will change your name,
Your new name shall be
Confidence, joyfulness, overcoming one,
Faithfulness, friend of god,
One who seeks my face.*

The song speaks to the power of God to change our lives. While Kanye West may talk about alternate realities and politicians talk about alternate facts, God's power promises to alter our reality, to alter the facts of our lives.

In the United Church of Christ, we are about changing lives; this is grace. And the world needs a church which believes in the power of God to change lives. But we also need it ourselves. We need grace: to know that the awful names we get called (or that we call ourselves) are not our true identity; to know ourselves by God's name for us - beloved, chosen, blest.

This power of God to change lives comes out in the story we heard Les read this morning, an abbreviated story of Joseph. You might remember the big moments of Joseph's story: as a teenager, the young Joseph endured the jealousy of his brothers; they beat him up, tossed him in a pit, and then sold him into slavery. Enslaved, Joseph resisted the advances of Potiphar's wife; imprisoned, he interpreted dreams; released, he came to run Egypt through times of feast and famine. From enslaved to in charge, Joseph remained estranged from his family. But then famine caused them to come to Egypt; through several ruses he tested them. Finally, he revealed himself to them and brought them down to Egypt.

But this year I began to wonder about this basic story. It started when my friend Jody Hirsh, the Jewish Educator at the JCC, led a discussion on Joseph. He looked at the end of the story in which Joseph becomes reconciled with his brothers. "How can this be?" Jody asked, "How can Joseph

forgive?” It does seem like scripture too neatly ties up the story: a happy ending. Could we forgive our siblings if they did such a thing to us?

So, this summer while on sabbatical I reflected and prayed about this story. And as I kept reading through it, elements I’d overlooked came to take on new significance for me, parts of the story that speak to how Joseph came to a place of forgiveness, moments when his life changed.

First, I noticed how the storytellers use Joseph’s age to punctuate the story: 17 when his brothers sold him into slavery; 110 when he forgave his brothers. Which means that while the narrative makes it seem like forgiveness came quickly; it really took 93 years before Joseph could say to his stricken brothers, “have no fear.” Even that might be too quick for me; but I appreciate that forgiveness took time. God’s power acts in the world; but more like the slow power of the Colorado River carving the Grand Canyon than the quick shift of an earthquake.

Spiritual healing takes time. Which is one reason we build a church out of brick and mortar instead of meeting forever in a tent. Our journeys unfold over a lifetime; and we need a church where that can happen. One worship service might inspire us; but real change in our hearts and lives takes time. The world needs a church like Plymouth (and we need it too) committed to creating change over the long haul, a Colorado River of grace carving out the deep beauty in our lives.

And yet, there were moments in the long arc of the Joseph story that seemed to propel change. I tried to call attention to these in our abbreviated version of the story. First, when Joseph went from prison to stand before Pharaoh he shaved and dressed. It sounded as simple as that; “When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh.” But in that verse lay a multitude of meanings. Joseph had previously dressed like a shepherd, an Israelite: desert robe, long beard, shaggy hair. He looked like a foreigner to the Egyptians. But now he shaved: cutting off the beard, losing his long hair. He made himself pass.

Any of us who have tried to “pass” know the cost of fitting ourselves into the strait-jacket of expectations. It’s the gay man toning down his flamboyancy; the woman who can’t get angry. It’s the African-American man who speaks with a softer, higher voice so that he doesn’t seem threatening to white people. It’s the Muslim who shaves his beard much like Joseph to not seem too foreign. But, oh, the cost of not being ourselves.

Scripture underscores this cost by having Pharaoh rename Joseph; calling him, “Zaphenath-paneah.” I’ve certainly butchered the ancient Egyptian; but I know the name means, “the one who reveals the secrets of life.” Not a bad name in and of itself, but it turned Joseph into a functionary. Pharaoh didn’t bother to learn Joseph’s name; he only learned how Joseph could be useful to him. In renaming Joseph, Pharaoh made clear that he was to make a break with his past and instead to just become the man Pharaoh needed him to be; a functionary.

The pain of this all became overt when Joseph revealed himself to his brothers. What caught my attention was this moment when everyone sat down to eat: the Egyptians, Joseph, and the brothers, all at separate tables. We normally focus on Joseph’s reaction to seeing his long-lost brother Benjamin but hear what happened when they sat down. “They served him by himself, and them

by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.” The Egyptians wouldn’t eat with the Hebrews; a segregated society. But what happened to Joseph? For all his attempts to pass, for all his attempts to become Egyptian enough, the Egyptians still would not eat with him. He sat alone.

His brothers wounded him; but the Egyptians made clear, “no matter what, you will not belong here.” Joseph realized in that moment that he would always be the foreigner, the outsider, the outcast no matter what he did to try to pass.

Now I’ve read this story a lot over the years, but I don’t think I noticed this detail until our congregation started really focusing on racial equity, facing the reality of racism and discussing issues of unearned privilege and unfair power. But our church opened my eyes and I see the discrimination right in the text: the Egyptians wouldn’t eat with the Hebrews for that is an abomination to the Egyptians. The world needs a church like Plymouth (and we need it too) that opens our eyes to the reality of pain. But also, the world needs a church like Plymouth that makes welcome and acceptance real, one that says, “no matter who you are or where you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” Joseph needed that; I need that; I suspect we all need that kind of welcome, the kind that seats us all at the same table.

After Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, the whole family settled with him in Egypt. The famine continued to rage. Joseph had stored up grain; and now people came to him, desperate. They sold everything to buy Joseph’s grain. And then the next year, when they didn’t have any belongings, they came again to Joseph. As he stood before them, the Egyptians said, “There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die.” The people became so desperately hungry that they sold themselves into slavery.

What did Joseph think at that moment when the Egyptians said, “Buy us and our land?” Did he feel proud of his planning ahead; the grain Savior of Egypt? Did he want to boast to Pharaoh of the profit he made? I don’t think so. I think that in that moment when the Egyptians sold themselves, Joseph realized that he’d become the very thing he hated. He’d become like his brothers, enslaving others, selling them into bondage. I imagine he cried; “Wretched man that I am! For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do” (Romans 7: 24, 19).

This moment in the story - if you were reading along in the Book of Genesis - comes across as out of place. You could even read the story without the scene. And yet, the original storytellers included it because it told us something so important about Joseph.

Just as the realization about the racism of the Egyptians affected him, so now an insight into himself did as well. Joseph faced an awful truth about himself; he did the very thing he hated. And as he continued to sit with that insight, I think it is what ultimately allowed him to forgive his brothers. I don’t think the forgiveness at the end of the Joseph story could have happened without Joseph’s insight into his own moral struggles.

One of the roles of church in our life is to help us see those places of growth in our own souls. We begin with confession because here at least we don't have to pretend that everything is perfect; we don't have to pretend to be angels. But confession isn't the only place that may make us aware of ourselves. Years ago, two families in our church didn't get along. Fake pleasantness covered up their feelings; but I knew. They sat near each other; neither willing to give up their pew despite their disagreement. And when we'd have a passing of the peace, it became for them the passing of awkwardness, a moment which caused them to see the brokenness in their relationships. We need a place in our lives like Plymouth (and the world does too) where we face what is broken in our lives; a place where we can say, "I have done the very thing I hate."

Still, Joseph's brothers did an awful thing to him. And it took time to forgive. They thought they might never hear those words. We can't really know what moved Joseph to forgive. But I know what moves my heart. More than just seeing the pain in the world, more than just seeing my own complicity, forgiveness comes as an experience of grace.

I need a place like Plymouth (and I think you do too) that continually pushes me to open my heart more and to let go of those things I grip too tightly, especially animosity. Like Joseph, I need a place where God can work on my soul and change my name. No longer wounded, outcast, afraid. But beloved, chosen, blest.

Friends, the world needs a place like that too. Alleluia and Amen.

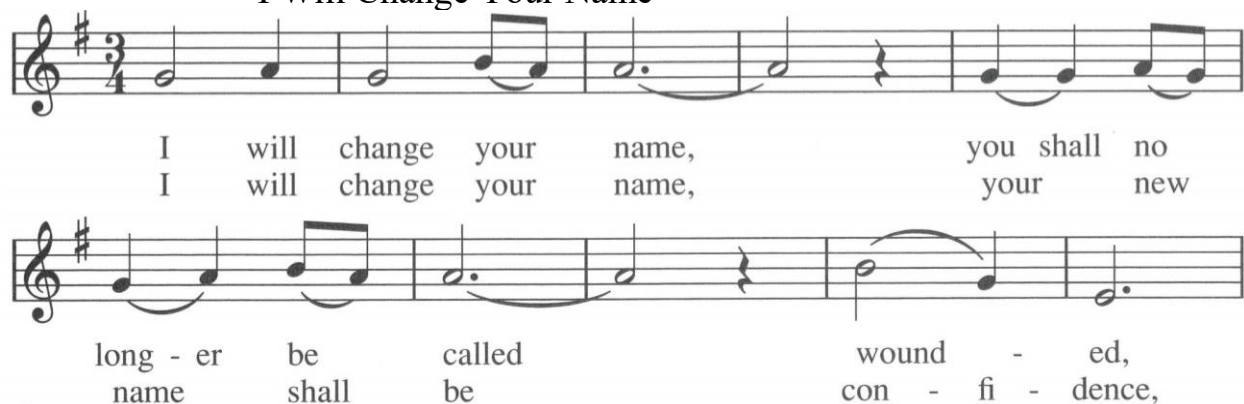
SCRIPTURE READING - “The Story of Joseph” from Genesis 41, 43, 47, 50

This morning our lesson comes from the Book of Genesis. We will hear portions of the story of Joseph, one of the sons of Jacob. When Joseph was seventeen, his brothers became jealous of him. They beat him up and sold him into slavery. Slavers took Joseph to Egypt. There he worked in the house of Potiphar but was falsely accused of desiring Potiphar’s wife and imprisoned. In prison Joseph became famous for his ability to interpret dreams. Our reading begins after Pharaoh had a dream no one could explain to him.

Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and he was hurriedly brought out of the dungeon. When he had shaved himself and changed his clothes, he came in before Pharaoh. And Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘I have had a dream, and there is no one who can interpret it. I have heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.’

Then Joseph said to Pharaoh, ‘God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. The seven good cows are seven years, and the seven good ears are seven years; the dreams are one. The seven lean and ugly cows that came up after them are seven years, as are the seven empty ears blighted by the east wind. They are seven years of famine. It is as I told Pharaoh; God has shown to Pharaoh what he is about to do. There will come seven years of great plenty throughout all the land of Egypt. So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall order themselves as you command; only with regard to the throne will I be greater than you.’ Pharaoh gave Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah; and he gave him Asenath daughter of Potiphara, priest of On, as his wife. Thus Joseph gained authority over the land of Egypt.

“I Will Change Your Name”





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Years later Joseph's brothers came to Egypt because the famine had spread to their homeland. Joseph was thirty years old. The brothers didn't recognize Joseph because he looked like an Egyptian. Joseph, still unknown to his brothers, invited them to his house for a meal.

Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!' With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there. Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, 'Serve the meal.' They served him by himself, and them by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because the Egyptians could not eat with the Hebrews, for that is an abomination to the Egyptians.

After this happened, Joseph revealed himself to his brothers and invited them to live with him in Egypt.

Jacob and his sons and their families settled in Egypt. Here is where our story continues...

Now there was no food in all the land, for the famine was very severe. The land of Egypt and the land of Canaan languished because of the famine. Joseph collected all the money to be found in the land of Egypt and in the land

of Canaan, in exchange for the grain that they bought; and Joseph brought the money into Pharaoh's house. When the money from the land of Egypt and from the land of Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, and said, 'We cannot hide from my lord that our money is all spent; and the herds of cattle are my lord's. There is nothing left in the sight of my lord but our bodies and our lands. Shall we die before your eyes, both we and our land? Buy us and our land in exchange for food. We with our land will become slaves to Pharaoh; just give us seed, so that we may live and not die, and that the land may not become desolate.'

So Joseph bought all the land of Egypt for Pharaoh. All the Egyptians sold their fields, because the famine was severe upon them; and the land became Pharaoh's. As for the people, he made slaves of them from one end of Egypt to the other.

"I Will Change Your Name"



I will change your name, you shall no
 I will change your name, your new
 long - er be called wound - ed,
 name shall be con - fi - dence,
 out - cast, lone - ly or a - afraid.
 joy - ful - ness, o - ver - com - ing one,
 faith - ful - ness, friend of God,
 one who seeks my face.

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Years later, after the famine ended and Jacob had died, Joseph continued to live with his brothers. He was now 110 years old, when our story continued...

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.

Here ends our lessons for today. Alleluia and Amen.