

Introductory Comments: We have spent a good part of the summer listening to stories from the first book of the Bible. This will be our last week in Genesis, and we have a powerful story with which to end this series.

Having pondered many of the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs, last week Berry invited us to consider the story of Joseph, Jacob's favorite son, and the great-grandson of Abraham and Sarah. Joseph had the remarkable ability to interpret dreams, but as a boy, Jacob was arrogant and insensitive in his dealings with his older brothers, and finally they got so angry with him that when an opportunity presented itself, they sold him into slavery in Egypt and then let their father Jacob believe that Joseph had been killed by a wild animal.

For many years, they lived with the guilt of what they had done, not knowing exactly what had happened to Joseph, even as they witnessed their father's debilitating grief.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, Joseph had amazing adventures. He attracted the attention of powerful persons, but eventually found himself in jail, accused of a crime he did not commit. His gift for interpreting dreams finally brought him to the attention of the Pharaoh, who had been troubled by his own dreams. Joseph rightly explained that the Pharaoh's dreams foresaw 7 years of good harvest followed by 7 years of famine. In response to Joseph's interpretation the Pharaoh made Joseph his governor, putting him in charge of preparing for those lean years, so that when they came, Egypt had great storehouses of food.

But the famine spread beyond Egypt, so that Joseph's father and brothers, who still lived in Canaan also felt its effects. Two years into the famine, Joseph's father Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt and sent his sons to buy some. There they encountered Joseph, who recognized them, but did not reveal his own identity.

Joseph questioned the brothers about their family, and then forced them to endure, in miniature many of the trials he himself had endured. He allowed his brothers to experience the threat of false accusation and imprisonment. He allowed them to experience the possibility of forced servitude or even death. Without revealing his own identity, Joseph forced his brothers to consider what had transpired between them. And then finally, in today's reading, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.

Genesis 45:1-15: Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.

And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Sermon: "The Stories We Tell"

I suspect that many of us have been paying attention to the events unfolding in Ferguson, Missouri, this week, which followed the shooting death of a young unarmed black man by a white police officer. Racial tensions have exploded in a community where 67 percent of the population is black, but only 3 of the community's 53 police officers are black. It needs to be said that we do not know all of the facts surrounding this shooting, but Michael Brown's death, when seen as part of a larger pattern, raises deep questions for our nation. NBC news reported that vigils were held in more than a 100 communities across the country on Thursday.

As I read the newspaper yesterday morning, I was struck by the words of Captain Ronald Johnson of the Missouri State Highway Patrol. Many of you know that the Highway Patrol was asked to assume law-enforcement authority in the St Louis suburb after four days of clashes between local officers in riot gear and furious residents. Captain Johnson is leading the Highway Patrol's effort to establish peace in that community. He has done so as someone who grew up in the neighborhood, and still lives nearby.

In this new role, Captain Johnson has chosen not to stay at the command post which was established in the parking lot of a local shopping center. Instead, he constantly seems to walk the streets, sometimes alongside the protestors. He described that decision to one reporter by saying, "They have questions, and they've got concerns....I can't know them if I'm up there and they're down here."

Maybe I noticed it because I have been living with the story of Joseph this week, but Captain Johnson struck a chord with today's text when he said: "I can't know them if I'm up there and they're down here."

For over and over in this brief passage from Genesis Joseph says to his estranged family "Come closer to me...come down to me...be near me...see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you." Joseph seems to know that the only way that his family will get past its history of deception and mistrust and injury— will be to live in vulnerable relationship with each other.

In this poignant story, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in such a way that it does two things simultaneously: he puts their tortured history as a family on the table directly, but at the very same time, *as the one who suffered that history most directly*, he offers a new way to understand it.

He tells his brothers: “*I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.*” He names the truth that lies festering in each of their hearts. This truth needs to be spoken boldly and honestly—but then he goes on to say, “*do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life.*” Later in the story, he will put the same sentiment even more succinctly when he says “*you intended it for evil, but God intended it for good*”.

This ancient story reminds us that there is more than one way to read our histories—and I’m not talking about putting on rose-colored glasses. I’m talking about reckoning with a God who takes our death-dealing ways and brings life from them.

The late John Sanford said, “Evil remains evil until [humanity’s] conscience grows because of it. Then God can use it for good.” Reconciliation happens between the brothers because they have grown-up in the only way it ever really is possible: through “painful self-confrontation, a reckoning with the past, and a willingness to give up egocentricity in order to serve God” [John Sanford, as referenced by Alan Johnson in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 1]

That’s just the kind of journey Joseph goes through in Egypt. We skipped quickly and painlessly between the story of Joseph’s youth that we heard last week, and today’s narrative, but long and difficult years lay between the two tales. Joseph is 39 in today’s story. During his years in Egypt Joseph has come to know a God who provides in the midst of the most crushing circumstances. Those years of encounter with God’s grace and mercy have shifted Joseph away from the arrogant, entitled attitudes that marked his youth and made room for a new way of being in the world.

Five different times in this short passage, Joseph tells his brothers in effect “God is mixed up in this; God is at work here bringing life from death, because that’s what God does.” And somehow the brothers are able to hear Joseph.

It’s important for us to acknowledge that any member of this family could have gotten stuck in the way he was telling his own life story: the brothers in their guilt, the father in his grief, Joseph in his desire for power—yet as the story unfolds we learn that each risks moving beyond that defining, reflexive attitude, and so each has a chance to know and to nurture new life. The same invitation waits for us. How does your particular story, our particular story, relate to the larger story God is bringing to life in the world? It matters how we answer that question.

Walter Brueggemann says that Joseph speaks “a word that creates newness” when he suggests that God is redeeming and using the brothers act of violence and neglect; he goes on to say that *the power to create newness does not come from detachment, but from risky, self-disclosing speech.*” It is only as Joseph makes himself vulnerable to his brothers that space is made for relationship. You may have noticed that when Joseph first revealed himself to his brothers, they were rendered speechless. They could not imagine the possibility of reconciliation. It is only after Joseph creates space for that relationship that the brothers are able to speak to him.

It is not so different for us, friends. God’s way in the world is not safe or predictable—we don’t get to nail down our five year plans and then implement them from on high. God’s way in the world is full of risk. God requires vulnerability—for that is God’s way.

I pray that we are seeing something of that Spirit at work in Ferguson, Missouri this week.

During the night last night, one New York reporter posted this observation about Captain Ronald Johnson. He wrote:

“In one extraordinary encounter, Johnson stood toe-to-toe with a protester who had moments earlier been shouting angrily at the cops.

“I have the same questions you have,” Johnson told the man as part of a five-minute speech. “I guarantee when the day is over, when we are all back in our homes, the answers that we look for today are going to make our lives better and our communities better.”

Johnson is looking for new answers, new ways of understanding dynamics of race and power, justice and opportunity. He is trying to create space for a new narrative, a new way of being in the world.

Captain Johnson is only one person, but he managed to appease that demonstrator, who ultimately said to him *“I salute you, sir”*

The apostle Paul has a lot to say about the new life that is available to those of us who are willing to let God move in and through us. Paul’s word for the role to which we are called is *ambassador*. Paul says that God is making God’s appeal through us—we are ambassadors for Christ—ambassadors for the new thing God is always doing in the world. I want to spend the rest of our time today thinking together about what it might mean to be an ambassador of this new life.

More than a decade ago I heard Julie Johnson, who was then with Columbia Seminary, explore what it means to be an ambassador. Here's what I remember from what she said:

Begin by recalling what you know of foreign service—

Ambassadors are chosen, appointed, sent by another.

They are charged to carry another's message, not to act with their own interests in mind.

Ambassadors live in embassies, where the flag of the country of origin, not the host country, is flown. Within the boundaries of the "enclave" of the foreign embassy, the flag of that foreign country establishes the jurisdiction and law of that foreign country, which is enforced by the Law of the Flag and international treaty—so embassies are like little pieces of home for foreign nationals.

Ambassadors have special privileges. They have immunity from prosecution, because they answer to the laws of a different jurisdiction.

Think about the purposes that embassies serve:

- Help with foreign adoptions or children who are born abroad
- Issue warnings when there is danger
- Help you to get from one place to another
- Get you home if you become ill or in trouble
- Embassies provide information about the home country to interested people
- They throw parties (in order to remember the customs of the host country)

Ambassadors live as guests—in that world, but not of that world

There are Implications for us here. The way that ambassadors behave reflects on the party that sent them. By extension of the metaphor, God is judged by the way we live.

If we are ambassadors, and this church is an embassy...

- Then, though we are shaped by our environment, our deepest identity and our charge comes from our relationship with God
- We are called to learn the culture, customs and language of the people to whom we are sent, but
- We need to remember who we are and what the values of our country of citizenship are.

Friends, the story we tell with our lives, and about our lives, that matters. Interpretations matter. We can simply pass along the patters of guilt and grief and violence that we have inherited, or we can watch for and join ourselves to the new thing that God is doing in the world. We can tell our stories in light of the larger story God is telling in the world.

To do so we will need to hear the truth as it is spoken by the brothers and sisters we have wronged. And we can risk that kind of listening because we trust that God can bring good even from the choices we most regret. We don't have to fear the truth. God can use that truth to grow us up and to bring life to the world.

This story of Joseph and his brothers offered strength, generations later, to God's people when they were in exile, wondering if God had forgotten them in the strange land in which they lived. It offers strength to us, too—the promise that there is no suffering God cannot redeem, no grave from which God cannot bring new life.

May we gladly offer our lives in service to the One who keeps making that promise come true.