

Texts: Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21; Luke 6:31-36

Subject: Joseph and His Brothers

Theme: The Only Way Out

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost; Sept. 27, 2020, Online;

Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Robert Frost write this poem called A Servant to Servants - some of you may know it - over 100 years ago. The poem recounts the deep longing of a woman whose work and responsibilities in a rural area has left her unfulfilled. She washes dishes, and stares out at the lake. She cooks and cares for the men working on the land, and distracts herself with thoughts of a lost love, her pained family history, and the limitations of her existence. It's not the life she has dreamed of, and while she may have had some regrets, she is resigned to push on, fulfilling her role:

*From cooking meals for hungry hired men
And washing dishes after them - from doing
Things over and over that just won't stay done.
By good rights I ought not to have so much
Put on me, but there seems no other way.
Len says one steady pull more ought to do it.
He says the best way out is always through.*

This last line has been swimming in my head these last few months. As so many of us have expressed feelings of being overwhelmed, anxious, upset, and frustrated. How do we move forward? How can we hold onto one another in trying times?

“The best way out is always through.” When we face problems, disagreements, or interpersonal conflict, sometimes, our first reaction is to ignore the issue, blame

others, or focus on the wrong that been done to us. These usually make the problem worse. We can let it linger until there's no good resolution left to find. When it comes to relationships, we hold grudges, and just can't seem to get over ourselves. We dig in our heels, and the distance between ourselves and our families, our neighbors, our friends, only grows.

You'd think that followers of Jesus would not get caught in these traps - we know the command from our Lord to "love one another as I have loved you" - to "love your neighbor as yourselves," and to "pray for those who persecute you" and even "love your enemies." We have the ministry of reconciliation, and forgiveness and ought to be the ones who reflect the mercy and grace of God in our lives. But guess what - we're sinners. You are. I am. We're selfish at times and weak, and jealous, and vindictive, and spiteful and shameful. Newsflash: I am. You are. Everyone is.

Why? We heard the story just a couple weeks ago of the fall - when the first earthlings doubted God's Word, and tried to grasp for themselves the power to know good from evil. We're part of that family. Maybe the world has made us cold and hard-hearted, and we must fight for everything we want and never let our guard down. Maybe we are modeling behavior that we saw from a young age, in our families of origin and we carry those behaviors around with us. Everybody's got FOOI - that's "Family Of Origin Issues." Without being humbled and healed ourselves, we may become ones who hurt others.

I love all of my four kids. I don't have a favorite. They are all unique and wonderful in their own ways, and all have things to learn. I dream about who they will become and the ways in which they will build the world around them and survive and

thrive in the future. I see how they relate to each other, and the ways they play and sometimes cause friction and conflict as well. I grew up as the oldest of five siblings, and I recognize the reality of sibling rivalry. We do not all get along all of the time. So to hear that Israel - that's *Jacob*, the Father, *loved Joseph more* than all his other children is to begin the story off with a clue as to how things will go. Last week he heard the promise to Abram - that God would make of him a great nation - and as the story unfolds in this book, we wonder how God is going to bring it to reality.

Isaac faced challenges, and his sons struggled as well. Joseph's story - and it's really about so much more than Joseph, of course - is this continued story of family struggle, favoritism and jealousy, loss and grief. It's not so foreign to us, is it? The story is dramatic! Whether we envision ourselves in the role of the Father, the brothers, or Joseph himself, we might see how no matter what we face, God is always present to bring to birth the promised new life.

The brothers are out working — they do the hard labor, while Joseph, in his special coat, stays at home. The coat has long sleeves, which notes that it's not for outside work. Joseph's older brothers resented him even before he told them about his dream - He knows very little about sheaves of wheat in the first place. They interpret the dream - correctly - to say that He would have authority over them. If we look back in the story, we'll remember that it was Jacob who tricked his father and took authority and wealth and power away from his older brother Esau in his lifetime. So we find that generational trauma being passed down.

His brothers at first plan to kill Joseph - of course they know the story of their father, they know what is possible, and they are afraid - so they want to prevent being

left out of the family inheritance. They're really mad at their dad who had showed such favoritism. They can imagine how the loss of this precious son will break his heart for good. Reuben speaks up, the voice of reason, saying they should not kill him, but leave him in the pit. Reuben had planned to rescue him later. Judah gets the idea to profit a little, and sell their brother to some passing traders. While Reuben weeps for the loss of his brother, he goes along with the plan to report his death to his father. The Father weeps too, and the future seems broken and the promise seems far away.

When the trauma of past generations catches up with us, and we become afraid of being left out, and we are cut off from the ones who have been entrusted to us, we can feel the promises of the past slipping away, we can feel the dreams within us dying. The impulse is to give up. Why would we seek to restore relationships with the ones who have hurt us? Why would we choose to remain in conversation with the people with whom we disagree? Why would we continue to fight for something that seems so out of reach?

"The only way out is through." We've all been through a lot. For our relationships, for our families, for our church, for our nation, the only way out of our problems is to do the work, to pick up the phone, to connect to each other, to have grace-filled conversations about our differences, disagreements, and disappointments. We have been give a command to do to others as we would have them do to us. It's not too much to ask for us to be the ones who break through cultural norms, to rise above challenges, and to trust in the power of God to bring good from the setbacks we face.

We hear it in Joseph's story: things go from bad to worse. He's trafficked into slavery. He gets unjustly accused and thrown in jail. He could have given up and kept

his mouth shut, forgotten all his strange dreams. But the only way out of his trouble to go through it. God always makes a way. He interprets the dream of Pharaoh, and finds himself in a place of power, to follow through on the mission that God has given him. He helps store up food for Egypt, and rescues his family from the famine, even after the death of his father, even after the hurt they have caused him. he forgives, brings reconciliation, and the dream is still alive. It's not by his own initiative, or his naiveté, or just failing upward. Joseph has trusted in God. And God has equipped him for this moment.

And God has equipped us as well.

We face struggles we never thought we'd have to overcome in our time. Families divided over politics, disease taking the lives of nearly 1 million people worldwide, the persistent evil of racism, economic hardships, violence, unrest, and a lack of justice. Frost writes, "by good rights I ought not have so much put on me." I have been feeling that one. So many are hurting, and we are 'cumbered with a load of care.' Still, God has promised abundance, mercy, forgiveness, and peace. We are still here. We are the product of the good trouble of those who have come before us, we are a remnant of the church of the past, we are the people of God called into this place and time to love and serve and have faith that in Jesus. We are still here. God's promises are always coming true. And we don't do anything by our own power, but by the Spirit of God in us. So we do not give up.

Sometimes we find ourselves in the pit. And the dream is still alive.

Sometimes we are shackled and carried away. And the dream is still alive.

Sometimes we are imprisoned by our own fears. And the dream is still alive.

But this is not about *our* dreams.

God's dream comes to us on the cross, for us and for the world to see - this favored and beloved Son, given up to death, to free every child of God from sin, death, the power of evil in the world, and to awaken the power of life in each of us. God's dream for us, so palpable, so present in the Living Word of Jesus is that we would be not jealous siblings looking to get our way, not children whining and complaining we didn't get our fair share, not self-righteous, or self satisfied, or self focused at all, but merciful servants, who give of themselves, who do what is needed and necessary, for the sake of the ones God loves so much.

We have been lifted up with him, taken out of the shame and pain of our own sin, and brought to a new place - call it the kin-dom of God - where we get to share in the love and mercy and grace so freely given to us. We get to speak words of healing and share the promises of God with our friends and children, and grandchildren. We get to believe in the constant presence of the love of the divine that never leaves us where we are, but transforms us and gives us power, not to *get our way* or *oppress* others, but to *show them the way*, and to *express* to others how God's promises are coming true here today.

Amen.