

**Are You in the Place of God?**  
**October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2014**

**Genesis 50:15-21**  
**Pentecost 17 A**

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The life of Joseph is probably my favorite of the Old Testament. It is a shining example of both patient endurance and of God's benevolence on his people. Now, Joseph wasn't always the hero type to be held up as an example. In his younger days when he was dad's favorite he was a little tactless when it came to those dreams he had of ruling over his family. And it didn't help his reputation that Dad liked him best. But humility came with time and circumstance. His brothers handed him over to slavery out of jealousy and let their father think he was dead. At a young age Joseph was separated from his family and taken to another country to serve a foreign household.

Contemplate for a moment how that might affect you. Joseph didn't change much. He perhaps learned some more humility but he lived the way he was raised. He was faithful to his God and that meant carrying out his responsibilities and duties faithfully wherever he was. And God blessed his faithfulness. In time, Joseph was made head of the household. But then the master's wife started coming on to him. Joseph resisted, he did the right thing. And so in anger and spite, Potiphar's wife accused *him* of trying to force himself on her. Joseph was thrown in prison.

Again, how might you react? But Joseph did not try to fight the fairness of the situation, he knew that was pointless. Instead he again remained faithful. And such a faithful and good prisoner he was that he was eventually put in a position of authority in the prison, even though he remained a prisoner. While there, he helped some prisoners of Pharaoh interpret their dreams. All he asked was to be mentioned to Pharaoh that he might be freed. But he was forgotten by the man he helped.

How would you feel if that were you? But Joseph did not complain and remained faithful. It was not until years later that Pharaoh had a strange dream and Joseph was remembered. And through Joseph and that dream the land was prepared for a harsh famine that would arrive in seven years and Joseph was made second-in-command of all Egypt. Eventually, Joseph's family comes to Egypt to buy food during the famine time. Joseph recognizes them. They do not know him. How would you feel seeing them again?

And now in our reading today, the brothers' father is dead. The brothers all worry that it was only the presence of their father that stopped Joseph from taking revenge on them for what they did to him so long ago. They prepare a little subterfuge, but as we see it is totally unnecessary: <Read text: Ge 50:15-21>.

Joseph's attitude is amazing. We know what it could've been. We know what the brothers were afraid of, and Joseph had the power to do it to them. But that's not what he feels and that's not what he wants. With his one expression, "Am I in the place of God?", he recognizes God's role in what happened to him and God's role as judge over his brothers. He is not God that he should question how his own life plays out. No matter where the influences come from, it is ultimately God who orchestrates them. And he can see the good that came out of it. But even when he couldn't see that didn't change his attitude on the matter. And for his brothers, is he God that he should judge them? Their sin was against the Lord and if they have to answer to anyone it is him, not Joseph.

So this is what we really have to ask ourselves to day, really look at and see if we need to adjust our attitude. Last week we talked about how to address the sin of a brother or sister in Christ, how do we help them for their own sake? But sometimes before we can help them, we ourselves need to be helped. Sin begets sin. Someone hurts us, physically or emotionally. Intentional or not, doesn't matter. We don't like to get hurt. And our default reaction is to hurt back. To get vengeance, revenge. Or if we're feeling particularly self-righteous, we'll call it getting justice. The anger boils up in us. Not at sin. Not at the fact that God's holy will and order have been violated, but angry that someone would dare to hurt us, angry at the person who did it. Oh we want to show them their sin alright. But only so that they'll feel bad for a while. Only so they'll apologize and see just how wrong they are!

As we talked about last week, that is not the reason we show our brother or sister their sin. We do it out of love, to stop them from being hurt by sin within themselves. To stop them from having their faith damaged or destroyed. We help them stop sin in order to rescue them. If we are confronting them in order to exact our pound of flesh out of some sense of balancing the scales, then we will not accomplish that goal.

But, how can we correct ourselves? How can we drag ourselves out of that anger in the self and lift our eyes heavenward to the proper attitude? The short answer is only by the grace of God. Only he can lift our eyes out of the muck and mire of selfish thinking and give us a proper perspective filled with grace. It's grace both on you and it's grace on them. And understanding how both parts work helps us to let go of that anger and be able to forgive from the heart.

The root of the problem is that we see the event the wrong way. We see someone else doing something wrong to us. We see a sin committed at our own expense. But as God makes it clear, that is not what is happening, or at least, that's not what he's concerned about and not how he wants us to view it. Instead of seeing it as a sin against you what

we have here is a person sinning against God and God using the effects of that sin to affect your life. Let me say that again, it's really TWO things here. There is what happened to you and there is a sin committed. Even though one came from the other, we shouldn't think of them as directly related.

I'm sure that sounds like semantic nonsense but give me a chance to explain why it works that way. Let's look at each part based on what Joseph says to his brothers here and how he properly understands it. The first thing we need to address is the hurt that we endure. Sin has consequences, and sin causes pain and so more often than not when we have been sinned against, we suffer in some way no matter how small. And like I said before when we hurt, it's our instinct to react in a negative way, especially if it feels personal.

But what if that weren't really what happened? What if, instead, it were some sort of discipline? What if it were unpleasant, but meant to produce a good and fruitful result? Would we be angry then? Do we get angry at our muscles for hurting when we exercise? Do we resent our parents who punished us to teach us right from wrong? Are we mad when someone slaps our hand away from something that would've hurt us? God is working in every unpleasant aspect of your life to bring better things for you. To be mad at the bad things that happen to us is to be mad at him. Joseph understood this correctly. He knew his brothers intention, but instead of that he recognizes that God had a higher and better plan through those actions.

Now, this isn't a foreign subject to us, we talk here all the time about how God uses every unpleasant and painful part of our lives to work for our greater good. We talk about how we don't need to see what that good is in order to trust that God is bringing it, just like Joseph did while still in prison. Our God, our Father loved us enough to send his Son to die in our place. Our God, our Brother Jesus loved us enough to die in our place to pay for all our sins. That same God will care for you in every aspect of your life. God loves you. He has zero desire to see you suffer. But where suffering or pain are necessary to produce a better result, just like the discipline of a parent, he will not hesitate to do it because he loves you and wants what is best for you.

We've talked about all that many times. What we maybe haven't brought home so clearly is that this means EVERYTHING unpleasant or painful. It means even the sin of another against us. They sinned, they acted but God allowed and God WILL use it to your greater good. When Paul tells us to rejoice in our sufferings he didn't say just the ones that come out of nowhere that nobody directly caused. He said all of them. Even those done to us deliberately by others. Just like happened with Joseph. His brothers acted, but it was God working Joseph's life. The instrument of our own pain may have been another person, but the director of our lives is still our Heavenly Father who cares for us using those incidents.

So you see, we can't get mad at the person who hurt us without being mad at God for letting it happen. What happens to you in your life, your experiences are all strictly between you and God. But even if we get over the animal instinct to lash out at what hurts us, that still leaves us with that urge to pursue some kind of justice. The other person did wrong and so something ought to happen for that, right?

Well, I'm not going to get too deep into this because we covered it last week. But I'll recall our chief point on that issue. You are not a better person than them. You need God's forgiveness just as much. You are not in God's place that you could judge and exact justice. To demand justice on their crimes is to demand justice on your own. Rather, remember what David wrote in Psalm 51 after he realized his sin with Bathsheeba. David had taken another man's wife, tried to deceive him into thinking the lovechild was his own, got him drunk, had him murdered and took Bathsheeba as his own. But what did he say to the Lord in the psalm? "Against you and you only have I sinned." It was really all against God. It was a rebellion against him. Not against people, but against God. We recognize the same in our brother or sister who hurts us in a sin. It's not personal against us. It's personal against God.

And just like them, we sin and rebel against our God. We all need his forgiveness as much as the next person. God has forgiven your sin. He died to make it happen. He came back to life to promise us we will too. Are you in the place of God that you should tell someone else what they need to pay for their sin? Are you in his place that you can deny them the same forgiveness you claim as your own from him? Of course none of this negates the call for repentance that we discussed last week, but it gives us the right attitude to approach it.

When someone hurts us we want to lash out, we want to demand justice. But God tells us instead to recognize the way things really work. See that it's not about you and them. It's about you and your God and them and their God. When we trust God to work our lives we won't be angry at the hurts. And when we cling to God for our own forgiveness we too will be able to forgive from the heart. Amen.