

Losing Control

Genesis 45:1-15

1 Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, "Have everyone leave my presence!" So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. 2 And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh's household heard about it.

3 Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph! Is my father still living?" But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

4 Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come close to me." When they had done so, he said, "I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! 5 And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. 6 For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. 7 But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.

8 "So then, it was not you who sent me here, but God. He made me father to Pharaoh, lord of his entire household and ruler of all Egypt. 9 Now hurry back to my father and say to him, 'This is what your son Joseph says: God has made me lord of all Egypt. Come down to me; don't delay. 10 You shall live in the region of Goshen and be near me—you, your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and all you have. 11 I will provide for you there, because five years of famine are still to come. Otherwise you and your household and all who belong to you will become destitute.'

12 You can see for yourselves, and so can my brother Benjamin, that it is really I who am speaking to you. 13 Tell my father about all the honor accorded me in Egypt and about everything you have seen. And bring my father down here quickly."

14 Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. 15 And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him.

As a crowded airliner is about to take off, the peace is shattered by a 5-year-old boy who picks that moment to throw a wild temper tantrum. No matter what his frustrated, embarrassed mother does to try to calm him down, the boy continues to scream furiously and kick the seats around him.

Suddenly, from the rear of the plane, an elderly man in the uniform of an Air Force general is seen slowly walking forward up the aisle. Stopping the flustered mother with an upraised hand, the white-haired, courtly, soft-spoken general leans down and, motioning toward his chest, whispers something into the boy's ear.

Instantly, the boy calms down, gently takes his mother's hand, and quietly fastens his seat belt. All the other passengers burst into spontaneous applause.

As the general slowly makes his way back to his seat, one of the cabin attendants touches his sleeve. "Excuse me, general," she asks quietly, "but could I ask you what magic words you used on that little boy?"

The old man smiles serenely and gently confides, "I showed him my pilot's wings, service stars, and battle ribbons, and explained that they entitle me to throw one passenger out the plane door on any flight I choose."

Can you say chutzpah? How about arrogance? Or is ignorance a more appropriate word for people behaving badly? Alec Baldwin leaves scathing telephone messages on the answering machine for his young daughter; Charlie Sheen trashes hotel rooms in a drinking spree; and even perky Katie Couric has been known to leave underlings trembling with fear following bursts of anger, withering glances and cutting snide remarks. [NOTE 1]

A recent and blatant example of an outrageous outburst comes from Robert Burton. This multi-millionaire, after donating millions of dollars to the University of Connecticut's growing football program, loudly demanded his money be returned and his name removed from the stadium when he didn't agree with the school's recent choice of a new coach. A local newspaper mocked his public tirade by depicting him as a large screaming infant in diapers with the caption, "I want my money back!"

These stunning displays of anger and apparent lack of concern for the recipients of one's wrath are the markers of people totally *oblivious to the meaning of empathy* and of people who are so self-absorbed that they have a complete disregard for the feelings of others.

Why do some people lose control in an emotional situation and feel entitled to satisfaction, while others can calmly traverse the rapids of disagreement and sail smoothly to the shores of understanding? Part of the answer to this has to do with the sermon I preached the Sunday before my vacation. Some people allow themselves to be controlled by their feelings and others realize and understand that they can choose how they feel or better stated, they can choose what they focus on, and they run their lives on the fact of the Word of God fueled by their faith, rather than how they might feel on any particular day.

Today's celebrities and their exploits are examined *ad nauseam* in tabloids, TV entertainment "news" shows and the Internet. The shock value of bad language and poor behavior are lessened simply because examples are so readily available. Reality TV is a booming business based on volatile encounters between participants while viewers eagerly await the personality clash and the resulting rampant bad behavior. I am so sick of commercials advertising reality TV showing people crying and exploiting whatever drama they can to get more viewers.

Now lets talk about Joseph, the anti-jerk. Joseph stands in quiet contrast to the "take- no-prisoners and have-to-have-the-final word" world that is so often on display. Joseph would never make it as a reality TV star. Just when we reach the climactic moment in the Genesis story, after the betrayal, the slavery, imprisonment, dream-catching and rise to power, finally the drama comes to a head. Joseph, second in command to the Pharaoh and arbitrator of food in a starving land, faces his treacherous brothers and has both the opportunity and the power to have them punished or even killed. And what does he do? The words seem to be leading up to a cataclysmic

resolution. Joseph, after all, "could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out ...(v. 1).

This is no jerk in this story ... when - given his treatment - he could have been. The reader could justifiably expect fireworks, revenge, tables being overturned, and the punishment and perhaps banishment of his brothers. Instead, Joseph astonishes - and perhaps disappoints - onlookers by offering his unlovable, unsympathetic, ne'er-do-well brothers' forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation.

It would be a bomb in the TV ratings. No drama? No one kicked off the island? No photograph going up in flames? No rose being ground into the floor or ring being thrown across the room? Where is the outrage? Where is the conflict, the tears, the screaming and the pain? Joseph seems to lack that certain something that so many celebrities seem to possess in abundance -- call it arrogance or over-inflated ego. Joseph instead offers an olive branch of remarkable proportions. **[NOTE 2]**

What do we allow to rule us? The Sunday before I went on vacation I talked about compromise and how we live by the Word of God as our only rule for faith and life and how we cannot run our lives by our feelings.

Think about people who would rule us, or might have control as in the mayor, the Congress, the Governor, the President, or a commander or even coach. Some people rule by fear and coercion. Others allow the power of the Holy Spirit to speak through them; this was clearly the case for Joseph. Joseph in that moment had every right to say "Take that!" to his brothers. His anger would have been justified. No one would have blamed him for at least reviewing the multitude of hurts that his brothers had inflicted on him and reminding them of the devastating pain and suffering that they had caused in his life. Joseph could very easily have made them suffer terribly. Joseph could have had his revenge. What happens instead? Simply grace. Grace lived, grace spoken, grace shared. Undeserved, unearned, perhaps even unappreciated (we never do hear the reaction of the brothers). But given nonetheless. **[NOTE 3]**

Here is drama of a different sort. The power is that of the Holy Spirit, easily overlooked and often underappreciated. Joseph could have commanded fear. He could have demanded retribution or at least groveling from his siblings. Instead, Joseph apparently considers the remarkable movement of God in his life, which has brought him to this life-giving moment of power. Perhaps he reflected on the way that the Spirit had woven its way in and through the course of his life; Joseph chooses to be a reflection of the miraculous, gentle, yet powerful Spirit. He mirrors God's mercy by his astounding insistence on being inserted in their lives. Joseph will not abandon his brothers in their hour of need. Just as Joseph has experienced God's grace and discovered God in the most surprising places, Joseph now supplies his brothers with the assurance that they are not alone. Joseph has known what it means to literally be in the pit of despair; he will not abandon his brothers to a similar fate.

Joseph does not forget these lessons and chooses to share them with his brothers. He has experienced both complete human betrayal and utter divine intervention. Now he has the opportunity to choose which of these experiences he will pass along. What will

his brothers learn? If they received the punishment that they deserved, they would learn only about justice. They could rightly say, "I deserve this punishment in return for my misdeeds." Since they instead receive mercy, they have the chance to learn about love and forgiveness. It is from that well that they can now draw, and it is that lesson that we pray that they - and we - will pass along to others on life's journey. **[NOTE 4]**

When the brothers are cowering in front of Joseph and awaiting his judgment, they are experiencing the same despair and fear that Joseph did so many years before when they abandoned him in the pit to confront a fate unknown. Joseph disrupts the natural flow of cause and effect; he refuses to engage in "tit for tat" politics. Although he has every reason to be consumed with anger, he chooses a different path and models his behavior on the mercy he himself has received from God. Joseph offers compassion

There is real emotion here; the depth of Joseph's passion is clear - he cried out when he could no longer contain himself. But he doesn't go for the kill; instead he offers compassion for those who were ruthless, and empathy for those who were unfeeling. Choosing forgiveness over retribution does not equate to a lack of passion. Joseph mirrored the sentiment that an Eastern sage would later utter, "Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal with the intent of throwing it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned." **[NOTE 5a]**

Joseph refuses to allow anger to dictate his actions. What to do, then, with anger, which can be the justified response in a situation? Clearly, Joseph is able to work through his fury and sense of betrayal, although there is no hint of his going for counseling or cathartically hitting his pillow at night. Did he pray? Journal his feelings into submission? Talk to his wife? We'll never know; only the offering of mercy and the resulting resurrection of his family are seen. Joseph turns his back on anger and instead reaps the harvest of a family restored; he is reunited with his beloved, aging father.

The story of Joseph is less a "how to" manage anger and more an example of the life-giving results of mercy. This is not to say that those who have been mistreated must instantly run out to offer undeserved leniency to their tormentors. Instead, the story encourages us to place ourselves in the hands of God, the fountain of forgiveness and the source of new life. The most life-giving response to bullies and abusers may be to give them a wide berth and deny them any further destructive influence over our lives.

[NOTE 5b] What Joseph models is *the refusal to allow those evildoers any power over his life*. Instead of permitting the resulting anger to destroy him, thus compounding the damage already done to him, he refuses to allow anger to take over his life and define his actions. He did not lose control of his emotions, but more importantly, he retains control over his life. Anger and fear are not directing his actions. He is able to choose how to respond to his brothers. **[NOTE 5c]** He puts anger behind him and offers them new life. By the grace of God, may we go and do likewise. Pray daily if not hourly to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and may God give us the grace to listen and be directed by His Holy Spirit. **[NOTE 5d]** Let's pray ... AMEN

Sermon Notes for “Losing Control” based on Genesis 45: 1-15
Given in Doster Community Church on August 7, 2022

- I. Joseph is the “anti-jerk”. After the betrayal, the slavery, undeserved imprisonment, dream interpreting, and rise to power, Joseph now has the perfect opportunity to exact sweet revenge against his brothers. Justifiably, Joseph could have made his brothers suffer. But instead, he offers his brothers forgiveness, mercy, and reconciliation!
- II. He could have given in to his anger and demanded retribution or at least reviewed the multitude of hurts that his brothers had inflicted on him. What happens instead? Simply grace, grace lived, spoken and shared. Especially in this case the grace is undeserved, unearned, even under appreciated, but given nonetheless.
- III. Just as Joseph has experienced God’s grace and discovered God’s hand in his slavery, in his imprisonment, and now in Pharaoh’s palace. Joseph has experienced complete human betrayal and utter Divine intervention. Which will he pass along? Which will you pass along?
- IV. I pray that you will pass along love and grace and mercy not what people deserve. Holding on to anger is like grasping a hot coal to throw it at someone else; you are the one who gets burned.
- V. Please don’t make a rule out of this message, that everyone who has been wronged needs to instantly run out to offer underserved leniency to their tormentors.
 - a. Instead, place yourselves in the hands of God, the fountain of forgiveness and the source of new life.
 - b. Don’t allow evildoers any power over your life.
 - c. Pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit!
 - d. What are you going to do about it? Write down two things that you can do differently this week to better follow Jesus.