

Ordinary Joe

Joseph's Life in the Book of Genesis
How God Uses Ordinary People to Carry Out His Extraordinary Plans

Message 6 – "Ordinary Joe: Reconciler"

Genesis 46-50

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Hello and welcome to St. Paul's Church. My name is Matt Skillen and I am one of the pastors here. I have the pleasure of sharing from God's word with you today. Before we begin, let us pray.

Gracious Lord, thank You for Your Word, and for the power of Your Word to speak hope and new life into our lives. Lord, open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as You conform our lives into the disciples that You have called us to be. Holy Spirit, I pray that You would not only make us hearers of the Word but help us to live it all for the sake of the One who loved us and reconciled us to the Only True God, in Jesus's name, Amen.

I see it in flashes. I was driving one day... one afternoon. I was driving my big F150 Mark III conversion pickup truck to work. I was a T-Mobile retail sales representative in Wichita at the time. I was 22 or 23 years old. On this particular day I had been asked to drive to a store that was not my normal store. It was in an unfamiliar part of town, and I was driving there to cover for an employee that had gone on vacation for the week. As I pulled off the highway at my exit, I remember I had a pretty long approach to the stop sign at the end of the off ramp. I was going to turn right at the stop sign. I could see the store, my destination, just a few yards past the stop sign. I was nearly there. Ahead of me there was a man driving a nicer, newer F150 (remember this is Kansas, F150 country). I saw him stop as I coasted up to the stop sign and saw him take off, also turning right.

Now, I know I took my eyes off of the truck in front of me to look to my left. I was checking to see if the coast was clear for me as I continued to slowly, ever so deliberately, coast to the stop sign. When I looked back up in front of me my heart sank to my feet when I saw that F150 that I thought had moved on was now stopped right in front of me. I reacted as quickly as I could, but I was too late. The right corner of my front bumper hit his rear bumper. I can still feel that jolt that you feel in a low speed wreck.

We pulled over at the side of the road. The other driver jumped out of his truck. I did the same. We asked, "Are you OK?" in unison. We replied in unison, "I'm okay." Adrenaline still pumping through my veins. My heart was racing. I fumbled for my phone to call the police. The man waved his hand in the air as if to say,

"No, don't do that." He looked at the bumper of this truck, which was noticeably dented and scratched, and said, "It's no big deal. Go ahead. We're good."

Now, I had been in my share of car accidents, and I'd been put through my paces. No matter how big or small the accident police reports are filed, insurance claims are made. Adjusters get involved, repair shops and deductibles and higher premiums... Friends, I saw this all happen in a flash right before my eyes when my truck collided with his. Just talking about it makes my blood pressure rise. But, in an instant, with just a few simple words, "We're good." It all evaporated.

In that moment, because of the mercy shared by this man... I don't even know his name, we were reconciled.

For several weeks we have been examining the story of Joseph found in the book of Genesis. This story is an excellent illustration—one of many in the Bible—of how **God uses ordinary people to do extraordinary things for his plan**—for the Kingdom of God.

In this story, we've seen how our "ordinary Joe" had something of an extraordinary life. Joseph was born into a family that was plagued by dysfunction and drama. His father's plural marriage was the source of a great deal of competition, and when there's competition, someone needs to win. And if someone needs to win, someone else has to lose. That is like a time-honored life principle, isn't it? To quote the great Ricky Bobby, *'If you ain't winnin' you're losin'.'*

But what we see in the Joseph's story is this win-at-all-costs culture that runs rampant in his family births feelings of jealousy, animosity, greed and violence. As pastor David shared, Joseph was sold into slavery and, as a result, lives an "up-again; down-again" life that involves moments of great success and moments of great oppression and failure. However, because God had placed a remarkable calling on his life, Joseph was ultimately placed as a very successful king of Egypt. And through a crazy turn of events, as Pastor John shared last week, Joseph has a reunion with his brothers who come to Egypt to buy grain. As Pastor John outlined this tentative reunion for Joseph and his brothers last week, I couldn't help but wonder how Joseph felt as he was, once again, face-to-face with his brothers. Sure, we have clues in the text that he had moved on. He had all but forgotten his traumatic exit from Canaan, but through God's infinite timing, just when Joseph was moving on with his life, the grander plan comes into focus. While we watched this story come together and saw these two factions of a fractured family come together we might have been thinking, "Oh, this is going to be bad..."

But as Pastor John shared last week,

**What we think is bad = "God is getting back at me."
God's aim is getting me back to him.**

Our God is a reconciling God.

What we see in the story of Joseph up to this point is a story of “unfinished business.” Yes, he had moved on. Jacob, Joseph’s father, hadn’t seen Joseph in what felt like a lifetime. He had mourned the loss of his son and tried to move forward as best as he could. But there was an unsettled nature within this family and God uses the vast chasm that had grown between brothers to preserve God’s chosen people and to ultimately bless Jacob and the rest of his family.

In the later chapters of Genesis we read that Jacob moves his entire family to Egypt, Pharaoh allows Jacob to settle in some of the best land available in Pharaoh’s kingdom. Jacob is re-introduced to his son, and Jacob blesses Joseph’s sons and proclaims they are members of the nation of Israel. After some time, however, Jacob dies and Joseph is granted permission to return his father to the land of Canaan to be buried with his family. There is a beautiful description of how both the Egyptians and the Canaanites entered into a period of mourning showing the deep respect that both communities had for him and for his entire family.

Jacob’s death creates a sense of tension among Joseph’s brothers. You see, Jacob was the anchor that held the family together. As long as he was alive, there was hope that his family would remain in connection with one another. But when he died and all of Jacob’s sons broke off to lead their own families, it was Joseph’s brothers who began to feel exposed and nervous.

We pick up our story in Genesis chapter 50 at verse 15. If you want to follow along, I invite you join me there as we read.

¹⁵Realizing that their father was dead, 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?" (Genesis 50:15)

Now I’ll stop right away to point out that I find this is a very relatable aspect of this story. In fact, I think it is *very ordinary*. After all the time that had passed since their reunion, there are things left unsaid. Now that the family had been reunited and all that had been once lost had now been returned, Joseph’s brothers were still very worried that their younger brother still held a grudge for the atrocities they committed at the beginning of the story.

What is relatable at this point in the story is that in the moment of a big transition in this family, the Patriarch has passed away and gone home to glory. In the reorienting of life that happens after such a disruption, the brothers realize they potentially have a problem. They have unfinished business. This seed of uncertainty grows into anxiety and they realize that now is the time to address it.

¹⁶So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, ¹⁷'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." (Genesis 50:16-17)

As the brothers approach Joseph it is clear they received some specific coaching from their dying father. On his death bed Jacob had the tremendous opportunity to reconnect with his son. Through the blessing of Joseph's sons, there is a sense that a peace had grown between them. Restoration and resolution were present where uncertainty once resided. Jacob had walked into the gap and found God had a great deal of fruit to bring forth in the relationship with Joseph. Knowing this, Jacob equips his other sons on how to find a resolution of their own with their brother.

Here is what they found. As they spoke to these words to him. The passage says.

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. (Genesis 50:17)

When I read this passage, even now, I feel a wave of relief fall over me, and I sense that Joseph may have felt the same.

While it would have been *very ordinary* for Joseph to hold on to a grudge, to seek retribution or revenge for the harm that had been done to him, any pain, or anguish or uncertainty that existed between Joseph and his brothers broke.

¹⁸Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." ¹⁹But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? ²⁰Even 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. ²¹So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them. (Genesis 50:18-21)

If holding a grudge and seeking retribution is ordinary, Joseph does the extraordinary thing. He forgives his brothers, which is unexpected. Even as the brothers come to grips with the crimes they had committed against Joseph and the likely punishment they'll receive. Instead of returning malice with malice, pain for pain, Joseph forgives.

Time and again, Joseph had seen how God had redeemed everything that had happened to him for the glory of God. Just when Joe thought he was done and gone for, God restored him. No matter how hard and how far down the well he fell, God elevated him higher and higher at each and every turn. Joe had gained all, to lose all, to gain it all back again and then some. He knew well the power of restoration, and he felt it necessary to restore his brothers.

It would have been *ordinary* to get revenge, but Joseph forgave.

What does God need to do to claim your ordinary?

Is God, perhaps, calling you do to something *extraordinary* in the life of someone you know? Someone you need to forgive?

Forgiveness is powerful. Look at what forgiveness does.

**Forgiveness heals.
Forgiveness restores.
Forgiveness is love.**

In the beautiful symmetry that exists in the Bible story, one can draw a line between this story and the compassion Jesus demonstrates in the New Testament while on the cross. Admittedly, Christ forgives on a completely different scale, but on a fundamental level, the *ordinary* thing to do in Jesus's case would be to find an out, to look for the exit, when the pressure of all the sins of the world began to weigh heavy on him. He was being crucified on trumped up charges for a crime he didn't commit. Jesus could have called up on every angel of Heaven to rescue him, but he didn't. He did the *extraordinary* thing. He died on a cross so that our sins could be... Forgiven.

In the shadow of the cross we are forgiven. We should extend this forgiveness to others. **Ephesians 4:31-32** says:

Put away from you all bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander, together with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.

Where in your life could you use healing?

Where in your life could you use restoration? What relationships have been strained and stressed because of some wrong that could never be made right?

Where in your life could you use more love?

These questions are not easy to consider. These kinds of questions put us in a difficult position. I knew it the moment my truck collided with another person's vehicle; Joseph's brothers knew it when they approached Joseph after their father died; and though I don't know your precise situation, I would be willing to bet that you know it too. You sense the chasm that has grown between you and another person or a group of people. Pain and uncertainty now exist between you. You may know exactly the day and time that it began to manifest; then again, you might not. But what you do know is that as time continues to pass, the distance between you will continue to grow.

God can claim your ordinary just as he did while Jesus died on the cross, and he can walk with you in the gap to heal, restore and love. Within the chasm that is created between us is where forgiveness is planted. It is watered with the love and compassion of Christ. We can harvest it together when we realize we've been forgiven, all of us through the blood of Christ. Just as he has forgiven us; we should forgive one another—without pretense and without conditions and without limitations.

Just as God would never seek to get back at us, because all he desires is to bring us back to him, so to it should be among us. God would have us brought back together.