

Embrace One Another
Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 12:9-21

Once upon a time (as all good stories begin) a Brethren farmer bequeathed his farm to his two sons. At first they worked the land together, sharing labor, splitting the profits. As time passed, they married, built separate homes, raised sons and daughters of their own, divided the land, and ran neighboring farms. Sadly, they grew apart, rarely spoke. Then one took offense, the other was outraged, and a quarrel ensued.

One morning the older brother rose to seek that a lake had appeared overnight in what had been the meadow between their homes. His brother's bulldozer sat where a great rock pile once stood. Now the rocks formed a curved wall that turned a meandering stream into a rising flood.

"Well, I'll be!" he said. "I'll go and do him one better. I'm calling the nursery and ordering a dozen twelve-foot pine trees to block his view." The day after the trees went in, the younger brother installed shutters to seal off the windows. The older brother angrily countered by moving six hog houses and a hundred sows and shoats upwind of his brother's house...who replied by cutting off the water pipeline to their common spring, which was on his side of the hill.

So the older brother went for the jugular. The old wooden bridge on their shared private road would have to go. This would force his brother to take a long detour to the main road. He called for a wrecker to drop the bridge and a load of lumber to erect safety barriers. The next morning, he met the young carpenter that was sent out, gave him his orders, and withdrew to await the next move.

1. Joseph's story (Genesis 37-50)
 - a. Genesis 50:15-21 is a challenging passage
 - i. Written to people who needed to know what God was like and what faithfulness to God and one another would mean for them.
 - ii. Comes at the end of a long story where many people had difficult choices to make. We can't understand the end without remembering the process.
 - b. What we have in common with Joseph (from Genesis 37)
 - i. A broken family: Joseph is the youngest, favorite child of the favorite wife.
 - ii. Joseph's bad report and his dreams. We wouldn't have appreciated our younger brother doing this any more than Joseph's brothers did!
 - iii. The ways families can play favorites, single out people, run over one another, write them "out of the will," cast them out. Joseph's is a bit of an outlier because of the degree, but modern families have members they don't speak to, etc.
 - c. Where we are different than Joseph (from Genesis 42-45)
 - i. The tables are turned. Joseph is in a position of power, and his dreams are proving true. But how will he respond?
 - (1) Genesis 42:7-8. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they don't recognize him. Wouldn't we want to be here?!?
 - (2) Genesis 42:9. Joseph remembers his dreams. How will they be fulfilled?

- ii. Joseph was in such a position of power, that he actually had very little to lose. His brothers couldn't sell him into slavery again; if they tried to hurt him, he had all the power; he could gain revenge to his heart's content.
 - iii. So what did Joseph have to lose? His soul.
 - (1) In chapters 42-45, was Joseph testing revenge as an option? Maybe. He hasn't decided what to do. I suspect it's not always clear to us, either.
 - (2) When we are hurt, something of value is taken from us. When we choose not to embrace one another, we give up even more. If we try to get even, we might well succeed at becoming even with our enemy.
 - d. What we can be (Genesis 50:15-21).
 - i. Throughout the story, there has been a steady movement from sin and brokenness to righteousness and restoration. This is the trajectory of God, and the hearers get to see the struggles that exist along this path. This is what it means to be part of God's family.
 - ii. The brothers finally get it in chapter 50. How many families break down after the parents are gone?! Difficult funerals that I have been part of. Now that Dad is dead, what will Joseph do? The brothers open themselves up to receive reconciliation.
- 2. Romans 12:9-21
 - a. Like Genesis, written to a group of people who needed to know what God was like and what faithfulness to God and one another would mean for them.
 - b. The Roman church was not "family." But for Jesus' work in their lives, they would not otherwise be a group. What would any of us be, were it not for Jesus and the Church of the Brethren? Our shared identity is given to us through nothing that we have done on our own. It comes from Christ!
 - c. They are creating an alternative community that may prove to be illegal. It will not be the empire that shapes our identity, our choices, or our preferences. It is the gospel.
 - d. In this, what will their life look like together? Can this group of people embrace one another?
- 3. One of the things that you ask the Moderator to do after this year of being pastor to the denomination is to speak to the state of the church, to tell you what I've seen. Brothers and Sisters, here it is...
 - a. This conflict will not undo us. Our commitments to one another---the bonds of love that connect us in Christ—are more important than this division. This issue is serious and we need to deal with it without sweeping it under the rug. But we are strong enough as a group to learn from this moment and grow from it. This conflict will not undo us.
 - b. Part of moving forward means remembering that conflict does not place us on opposite sides of things. Because of our common baptism, we are already on the same side. To move forward means that so many of us need to stop the name calling and the labeling, the blogs, FB posts and listservs that only tell part of the truth, and the contempt we seem to have for so many with whom we disagree.

- c. What an opportunity---in this generation!---that we have to give witness to this thing that has happened to us, a transformation that we did not bring about and a family that we did not ask for, all the gift of God! How desperately that is needed in this world.
- d. Ministries of Central/Congregations in Action: "Daddy threw me down the stairs again." How desperately the world needs to see an authentic Brethren expression of Christianity that combines both an uncompromising love for the Gospel of Jesus Christ and an unwavering love for one another; that our life together would so reflect the kingdom of God that one day the prophecy of Zechariah 8:23 would come true in our presence: Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days ten men from nations of every language shall take hold of a Jew, grasping his garment and saying, "Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you."

4. Conclusion

- a. We need some help along the way, and we have it. At the end of Joseph's story, he fell back on the fact that they were all brothers, not through choice, not through anything they had done, simply by the fact of their birth. And that, in the end, was worth protecting.
- b. Our primary identity as brothers and sisters in was given to us through the death and resurrection of Jesus. One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.
- c. One more unfinished thread, about those Brethren farmers...

The evening after meeting with the carpenter, the older brother went down to survey the wreckage of the old bridge. As he rounded the hill, there stood a newly rebuilt bridge---wider, more beautiful, with craftsman railings. And his brother stood in the middle, marveling at the workmanship. He turned and came toward him with outstretched hands.

"I can't believe you'd do this for us, after all I've said and done to you. It takes a big man to take the first step. I'm sorry for my behavior." They seized each other's hands, embraced, then turned to see the carpenter getting into his pickup.

"Hey, wait," they both shouted at him, "not so fast. Please stay; we've got a lot of rebuilding to do around here."

"I can see that you do," he replied, "but how can I do anything else when there are so many bridges to build. You'll have to take the next steps."