

## **Sermon by Pastor Dan Hollis (8-16-20) on Genesis 45:1-5**

Joseph had a complicated life. A life full of love, betrayal, injustice, struggle, reversal of fortunes, reversal of reversal of fortunes, uncertainty, loss, gain, confusion, trauma... I could go on forever. But just imagine all the pressure that's been building up in Joseph up to this point. There's just been so much in his life. So much pressure, so much pain, so much effort he's had to put in... and it all comes to a head—again—this time as the very brothers who sold him into slavery walk into his court—without knowing it's him—asking him for help.

I imagine there are few listening to this sermon who have ever been sold into slavery before, let alone by their own families. But we do know that human trafficking is still very real, and not just in some backwater half a world away, but in our own backyards, so maybe someone worshipping with us today has had that experience. We also know that there are families in this country who can very easily trace their lineage and their stories straight back to the African slave trade and the ripples that have echoed since. And there are many who have experienced modern equivalents to slavery through the prison system. That said, the specifics of Joseph's life that Rev. Estelle described... can be hard to relate to for a lot of people.

But none of us are strangers to stress. None of us are strangers to mounting pressure, or a life full of complications that grow too great to bear. And so none of us should find Joseph's reaction to this moment something alien or unrelatable. After everything that he's been through, all the trauma he's suffered as a result of the actions of his loved ones, and all he's gone through to get here today... his brothers walk through the door.

And the dam breaks.

There are some who might describe what Joseph went through in our Scripture reading as a breakdown. He screams at his court, sending them all away... and he cries so loud, so hugely that he can be heard by people who aren't even anywhere near the room. Everything that's inside Joseph, all these years of just... everything... are pouring out of him.

Some might call this weakness. Weakness before your court, the people you have been scrabbling for respect from your entire life, and weakness before the people who caused all of your misfortune in the first place. Some would say that he should have been waiting for a moment like this, for his brothers to come before him, hat in hand, so he can throw of his own hat and say, "Remember me?" Ooh, there's something visceral about a comeuppance story like that. "Remember that time you sold me into slavery because

daddy didn't love you enough? Well guess who's getting carted off to Egypt now?" Victory, revenge, strength.

Instead Joseph shows weakness. Or I'd rather call it "vulnerability." He does that thing that men, for one, are never taught to do. Big men don't cry. It's a sign of weakness. In the same kinda way that women are told to keep their "composure" lest they be considered "nasty" or "neurotic."

The message I think we're to learn from this moment in Joseph's story, and the moments that come after, is that outpourings of emotion like that are okay. Not only that, but they can be healing... and they bring us closer to God.

I want to talk to you a little about the word "catharsis." It's a word some of you may be familiar with, but it doesn't come up in everybody's daily conversation. But it is something I think that's kind of a universal experience.

It's a term that was first used in psychology by a guy named Josef Breuer, as a way for people to experience and work through the emotions they were wrestling with in a safe environment, and in doing so to move through and move past the trauma that had created such a rat's nest inside them. In Hollywood you often see catharsis expressed by people whaling on a punching bag until the thing bursts and their knuckles come away bloody after one last big scream. You see people beating pillows or smashing vases or expensive technical equipment. You see people yelling at each other with wild abandon, and—in the truly terrible examples—people hitting each other, or killing each other.

That's not catharsis. That's a kind of emotional release, to be sure, which catharsis also is... but what I'm talking about today is more than just letting the emotions that knot us up go... it's about letting us truly feel them, accept them, come to terms with them... and heal.

What Joseph did in that moment was allow himself to feel everything that had happened to him up to that point. He let it all come rushing in, and allowed it to flow through him, the ups and downs, the goods and bads, and the complicated feelings he had for the family he loved who had betrayed him.

And even though he sent away his court, he didn't send away his brothers—even though to them he was still a stranger. This outpouring of emotion wasn't done alone in his room, or in an empty basement with an old punching bag. He let these emotions flow through him in the presence of others, to heck with the consequences.

In sociology this is called "social sharing." It's that thing we do when something emotional happens in our lives and we share it with someone else, whether it was a good experience or a bad one.

Émile Durkheim describes it as an emotional communion, where you and the people you're sharing with can feel it and work through it together. This builds up your connection with others, and actually renews your strength, self-confidence, and can even improve your trust in the world.

As Christians, and certainly with our New England heritage of Puritan roots, letting our emotions off the leash is frowned upon, right? For some, it's simply considered improper, but for others it's considered dangerous. And at times it is.

And some emotions can be both! Jedi Master Yoda once said, "Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering." And he's right. But sometimes fear is there to keep us safe. And sometimes it's not. Determining which emotions are healthy and which emotions are dangerous is a lifelong exercise in and of itself, but the answer isn't to keep any strong emotion to ourselves and only share the safe ones. Depending on who you're talking to, that may be the "Christian" message, but it's certainly not the one we see in the Bible.

In the Bible we see Jesus—a role model if ever there was one—weeping in front of his followers when his good friend Lazarus died. We see that same Jesus lashing out in anger at the money-changers defiling the holy temple and taking advantage of the poor. The apostle Paul, the biggest single author of the New Testament, tells us in Romans 12 to "Rejoice with those who rejoice," and "weep with those who weep." We even see God in the Hebrew Scripture moved to outpourings of anger and compassion, and in Zephaniah God is described as so proud of God's people as to be moved to sing loudly, "as on a day of festival."

And we are made in God's image.

It's so easy for us to fall into the philosophical understanding of God as this removed, uncaring, immovable monolith that knows all and flaps at nothing. But in the actions of God and the existence of Jesus Christ, we see that God is an emotional being, a being that may be beyond all things but still knows the same love and the same sadness and the same anger that beats in our breasts. Our goal as Christians in our lives should be to come closer to God—that's where everything we preach about on a Sunday comes from—and part of coming closer to God is exploring the rich tapestry of emotions God has granted us with—the ups and the downs—and following God's examples.

God has shown us the healing that comes with letting those emotions overflow from time to time, and not just alone. Psychology and sociology, they've shown us that too. Even Joseph. I can't tell you what Joseph should have done in the situation he was in—only Joseph can make that decision—and I can't tell you what you should do if you find yourself

in a similar situation. But in this specific case, what did happen was this: After our reading, after Joseph had poured out his heart and then revealed himself to his brothers... healing was able to happen. Joseph was a bigger man than most of us would have been, and found a way to make sense of his life and make peace with his family. How that came to be looked one way for Joseph—and I encourage you to read the whole story for yourself—and it might look different for you. But the reason he was able to heal from those emotions and foster healing in his life and the lives of others, was because of that catharsis. That social sharing. That allowing himself to experience all the complicated emotions warring within himself and pour it out before others.

I don't imagine Joseph was really as eloquent as chapter 45 makes him out to be. At least not right away. After an experience like that, I don't think he was in any kind of shape to put words together as prettily as we see him do in the verses that come after today's reading. But I know the spirit is true. For Joseph, what he and his family needed was reconciliation and meaning-making. For you, the healing and the meaning-making that you need on the other side of your emotions may look different. But that healing can't happen if we keep it to ourselves... and if we deny it to ourselves.

Letting it out, letting it flow through you, sharing it with others... it's not only okay, it's healing, it's freeing, and it brings us closer to God.

Amen.