

KNOWN IN THE UNKNOWN: Taking Your Next Right Step in Love

Genesis 45:1-15 (Message)

Rev. Melissa Hatfield - First Baptist Church, Jefferson City, MO

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/taking-your-next-right-step

One of the podcasts I listen to is “The Next Right Thing” with Emily P. Freeman. It is a podcast about making decisions that are making our lives. It is estimated adults make over 35,000 decisions every day. Many of those decisions are second nature. Emily’s podcast is dedicated to the decisions that aren’t. It can be scary to take a step when you don’t know how it will all work out. We want all 10 steps of a 10-step plan before we take step one, but that isn’t always possible. Emily guides listeners on how to take the next right step and to do so in love ... not just any love, but our next right step with God who is Love.

But what if those decisions relate to people you have wounded or people that have wounded you? How do we take the next step in love in broken relationships?

In our current series, we’ve been walking through the story of Joseph in Genesis, the first book in the Bible. In our passage today, it has been around 23 years since Joseph’s brothers betrayed him when he was 17, selling Joseph into Egyptian slavery which was option B. Option A, which they were talked out of, was to murder him. This history of their relationship is critical to today’s story.

Joseph is a man of deep wounds. He was wounded by the loss of his mother at a young age, by the mistreatment of his brothers, by his years as a slave, by the false accusation of Potiphar’s wife, by the loss of years with his beloved father, by all that could have been and should have been.

Joseph is also a broken man, who in the immaturity of his youth, proudly wore the privilege of his father’s favoritism, flaunting it in front of his brothers. There is enough brokenness to go around in this family.

As the story develops, we learn what this brokenness cost the family. The brothers’ guilt over their treatment of Joseph was a dark shadow that never lifted from the family. Each day the brothers witnessed first-hand the tremendous grief of their father, Jacob, because of their choices. And Joseph’s brokenness led to slavery, and imprisonment and seemingly crushed dreams. In their pain, I’m sure Jacob and his sons wondered if God had forgotten them. In his imprisonments, I’m sure Joseph wondered if God had forgotten him. What was not forgotten was the enduring pain of a deeply broken relationship among brothers. And, in today’s text, this takes center stage in the climax of Joseph’s story.

As Pastor Hannah mentioned last week, the shadow of famine fell over the land. Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of preparing for the famine, and, under Joseph's leadership, Egypt was ready to provide. Two years into the famine and 23 years after they betrayed him, Joseph's brothers arrive in his presence, seeking to buy food for their family in Canaan. They didn't recognize Joseph, but Joseph recognizes them. Those familiar faces – the faces he'd grown up with, the faces that looked down at him from the top of the pit, the faces that glared at him with no remorse as he was bound and hauled away to an unknown future. One look brought it all back for Joseph.

Some of us have been there before. We try to forget the ways others have hurt us. We try to forget the ways we've hurt others. And sometimes it works. But then, out of nowhere, we come face to face again with the pain and the hurt, and we ask the question: How do we take the next step in love in broken relationships?

What is Joseph's next step now that his brothers reappeared? Chapters 42- 44 of Genesis tell us Joseph goes all business. He hides his identity. He speaks harshly to his brothers with accusations he knew were unfounded. In short, Joseph took advantage of his power to deal with a group he knew could be untrustworthy because of their earlier treatment of him. Maybe he was motivated by his wounds. Maybe he was motivated by a desire to know if they had changed. Maybe it was a mixture of both. While we don't know his motive, we know his next steps were guarded yet moving towards reconciliation. They weren't steps to get revenge or for Joseph's advantage. Each next step gave Joseph a chance to discern if his brothers had changed over the years. And Joseph found that, indeed, they had. In the last scene before our story today, Joseph sees this in Judah, the oldest brother, the brother who devised the plan to sell Joseph all those years ago. This same brother now stands before Joseph, unaware it is Joseph, and offers to spend the rest of his life as an Egyptian slave instead of their youngest brother. When Joseph witnesses the change in Judah – that he was willing to become a slave for a brother rather than enslave a brother as he had done to Joseph, Joseph is ready to take the next step in love.

Genesis 45:1-15

Joseph couldn't hold himself in any longer, keeping up a front before all his attendants. He cried out, "Leave! Clear out—everyone leave!" So there was no one with Joseph when he identified himself to his brothers. But his sobbing was so violent that the Egyptians couldn't help but hear him. The news was soon reported to Pharaoh's palace.

This was not the first time Joseph had wept since his brothers had walked back into his life. It was the third time mentioned in Genesis, but it was the only time he did it in front of others – and not just anyone – the ones who had wounded him. The second time Joseph wept is in

Genesis 43:30 describing Joseph as being **deeply moved** upon seeing his youngest brother, Benjamin, and he hurried out of the room to weep in private. The Hebrew word for “deeply moved” here is the same word used in Hosea 11:8 when God talks about his deep yearning for Israel despite their unfaithfulness. “How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, O Israel? My heart recoils within me; **my compassion grows warm and tender.**” Despite Israel’s betrayal, despite their unfaithfulness, God’s yearning for Israel moves God to compassion rather than vengeance.

Despite the brothers’ betrayal, Joseph is deeply moved. How could he destroy them? How could he treat them the same way they treated him? God has been at work in Joseph and his brothers, preparing them for this moment of reconciliation.

“Joseph spoke to his brothers: “I am Joseph. Is my father really still alive?” But his brothers couldn’t say a word. They were speechless—they couldn’t believe what they were hearing and seeing. “Come closer to me,” Joseph said to his brothers. They came closer. “I am Joseph your brother whom you sold into Egypt.

Joseph reminds them of what they did not to make them feel bad, but to assure them – it is really him. No one else knows the dark family secret except for the brothers in this room.

But don’t feel badly, don’t blame yourselves for selling me. God was behind it. God sent me here ahead of you to save lives. There has been a famine in the land now for two years; the famine will continue for five more years—neither plowing nor harvesting. God sent me on ahead to pave the way and make sure there was a remnant in the land, to save your lives in an amazing act of deliverance. So you see, it wasn’t you who sent me here but God. He set me in place as a father to Pharaoh, put me in charge of his personal affairs, and made me ruler of all Egypt.

We don’t know when but somewhere along the journey, Joseph realized God had been at work throughout the entire unknown. When he felt forgotten in the pits and the prisons and the pain, he was known the entire time. And he wanted his brothers to know this, too. Joseph’s next step in love is to reframe the narrative of the pain and brokenness. The brothers made evil choices, but God had worked those choices for good. Still speechless and in shock, the brothers say nothing as Joseph gives orders for the next steps they will take as a family to move towards reconciliation and healing.

“Hurry back to my father. Tell him, ‘Your son Joseph says: I’m master of all of Egypt. Come as fast as you can and join me here. I’ll give you a place to live in Goshen where you’ll be close to me—you, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and anything else you can think of. I’ll take care of you there completely. There are still five more years of famine ahead; I’ll make sure all your needs are taken care of, you and everyone connected with you—you won’t want for a thing.’ “Look at me. You can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin can

see for himself, that it's me, my own mouth, telling you all this. Tell my father all about the high position I hold in Egypt, tell him everything you've seen here, but don't take all day—hurry up and get my father down here.” Then Joseph threw himself on his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his neck. He then kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Only then were his brothers able to talk with him.”

They wept. 23 years of pain, isolation, shame, brokenness began pouring out of them onto the palace floor. Only after the pain began to pour out was space created to talk once again as brothers.

Regarding this moment of reconciliation in Joseph's family, author Bruce Waltke wrote, *“It is about loyalty to a family member in need, even when he or she looks guilty; giving glory to God by owning up to sin and its consequences; overlooking favoritism; offering up oneself to save another; demonstrating true love by concrete acts of sacrifice that create a context of trust; discarding control and the power of knowledge in favor of intimacy; embracing deep compassion, tender feelings, sensitivity, and forgiveness; and talking to one another. A dysfunctional family that allows these virtues to embrace it will become a light to the world.”*ⁱ

These virtues they embraced were the next steps Joseph and his brothers took in the unknown of this grand finale. They were steps of vulnerability and risk; steps of repentance and forgiveness; steps in the direction they hoped it would go but were not guaranteed it would go. They were not the first steps in the healing process for Joseph, but they were the next steps in Love.

For you, the next step in love in a broken relationship may be inviting God to first do a healing work in you. Before Joseph was ready to reconcile with his brothers, God was at work in his heart, moving him toward compassion and forgiveness. For you, the next step in love may be owning your role in the brokenness and asking for forgiveness. For you, the next step may be asking God for insight to discern whether someone has changed so that your next steps may be informed and wise. For you, the next step may be choosing to be the first to take the next step in love.

Joseph was a wounded man, but God worked in his life to heal him. And through the transformative work of God, the one who had so much taken away from him ... his colorful coat, his dreams, his freedom ... this one ultimately becomes the one to begin the healing for their family.

Today, we can see all ten steps of the plan, but for Joseph, it was one step at a time toward God's dream, trusting he was always known in the unknown. That God was always with him. When we can't see the whole story, we're invited to take the next right step with God in love.

ⁱ Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 565-66.