Genesis 43-44 Sermon – The Blessing of Transformation

As we get back to the story of Joseph, we find God's chosen and dysfunctional family contemplating going back to Egypt for a second time. In the chapter previous, Joseph's brothers went down to Egypt because of a severe famine. Here they meet Joseph, but they don't recognize him. 22 years have past and he is now second in command in Egypt.

When Joseph sees his brothers, he tests them to see if their hearts had changed at all; to see if they were the same people who would throw their brother in a pit and sell him to slavery out of their jealousy. Joseph holds back one of his brothers, Simeon, and accuses them all of being spies in the land. Joseph says that he will return Simeon if they bring their youngest brother, Benjamin with them next. Joseph also sends them back with the money they brought with them to buy the grain, arousing further suspicion from everyone, especially Jacob when the brothers get home.

As Pastor Rich pointed out last week, we see in this part of the story how sin can tear a family apart. When it goes unconfessed, it doesn't simply go away, but seeps into every facet of our lives, causing us to act and react in destructive ways. Here, even twenty years later, we see a family riddled with guilt, still trying to cover their tracks, scheming and lying to each other, until Jacob feels the whole world is against him.

This morning, we are going to focus on Judah, as he is central alongside the story of Joseph. In these chapters, Judah arises as a leader in the family. But not just any leader, but a leader that brings healing to this broken family. Judah's story is best told all together, but considering reading two whole chapters would make this quite long, I have selected portions that we will look at this morning.

Let's read from Genesis 43-44:

…So when they had eaten all the grain they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, "Go back and buy us a little more food."

[3] But Judah said to him, "The man warned us solemnly, 'You will not see my face again unless your brother is with you.' [4] …

[8] Then Judah said to Israel his father, "Send the boy along with me and we will go at once, so that we and you and our children may live and not die. [9] I myself will guarantee his safety; you can hold me personally responsible for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him here before you, I will bear the blame before you all my life. [10] As it is, if we had not delayed, we could have gone and returned twice."

[11] Then their father Israel said to them, "If it must be, then do this: Put some of the best products of the land in your bags and take them down to the man as a gift—a little balm

and a little honey, some spices and myrrh, some pistachio nuts and almonds. 12 Take double the amount of silver with you, for you must return the silver that was put back into the mouths of your sacks. Perhaps it was a mistake. 13 Take your brother also and go back to the man at once. 14 And may God Almighty [p] grant you mercy before the man so that he will let your other brother and Benjamin come back with you. As for me, if I am bereaved, I am bereaved."

15 So the men took the gifts and double the amount of silver, and Benjamin also. They hurried down to Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. 16 When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, "Take these men to my house, slaughter an animal and prepare a meal; they are to eat with me at noon."

[Here the brothers sit down to eat, explain why they brought back the silver. Joseph is overcome with emotion at the sight of his youngest brother, Benjamin, and he gives him 5 times the amount of food as the others.]

Now Joseph gave these instructions to the steward of his house: "Fill the men's sacks with as much food as they can carry, and put each man's silver in the mouth of his sack. 2 Then put my cup, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's sack, along with the silver for his grain." And he did as Joseph said.

3 As morning dawned, the men were sent on their way with their donkeys. 4 They had not gone far from the city when Joseph said to his steward, "Go after those men at once, and when you catch up with them, say to them, 'Why have you repaid good with evil? 5 Isn't this the cup my master drinks from and also uses for divination? This is a wicked thing you have done.' "

6 When he caught up with them, he repeated these words to them. 7 But they said to him, "Why does my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to do anything like that! 8 We even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the silver we found inside the mouths of our sacks. So why would we steal silver or gold from your master's house? 9 If any of your servants is found to have it, he will die; and the rest of us will become my lord's slaves."

10 "Very well, then," he said, "let it be as you say. Whoever is found to have it will become my slave; the rest of you will be free from blame."

11 Each of them quickly lowered his sack to the ground and opened it. 12 Then the steward proceeded to search, beginning with the oldest and ending with the youngest. And the cup was found in Benjamin's sack. 13 At this, they tore their clothes. Then they all loaded their donkeys and returned to the city.

14 Joseph was still in the house when Judah and his brothers came in, and they threw themselves to the ground before him. 15 Joseph said to them, “What is this you have done? Don’t you know that a man like me can find things out by divination?”

16 “What can we say to my lord?” Judah replied. “What can we say? How can we prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants’ guilt. We are now my lord’s slaves—we ourselves and the one who was found to have the cup.”

17 But Joseph said, “Far be it from me to do such a thing! Only the man who was found to have the cup will become my slave. The rest of you, go back to your father in peace.”

18 Then Judah went up to him and said: “Pardon your servant, my lord, let me speak a word to my lord. Do not be angry with your servant, though you are equal to Pharaoh himself. 19 My lord asked his servants, ‘Do you have a father or a brother?’ 20 And we answered, ‘We have an aged father, and there is a young son born to him in his old age. His brother is dead, and he is the only one of his mother’s sons left, and his father loves him.’

21 “Then you said to your servants, ‘Bring him down to me so I can see him for myself.’ 22 And we said to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; if he leaves him, his father will die.’ 23 But you told your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes down with you, you will not see my face again.’ 24 When we went back to your servant my father, we told him what my lord had said.

25 “Then our father said, ‘Go back and buy a little more food.’ 26 But we said, ‘We cannot go down. Only if our youngest brother is with us will we go. We cannot see the man’s face unless our youngest brother is with us.’

27 “Your servant my father said to us, ‘You know that my wife bore me two sons. 28 One of them went away from me, and I said, “He has surely been torn to pieces.” And I have not seen him since. 29 If you take this one from me too and harm comes to him, you will bring my gray head down to the grave in misery.’

30 “So now, if the boy is not with us when I go back to your servant my father, and if my father, whose life is closely bound up with the boy’s life, 31 sees that the boy isn’t there, he will die. Your servants will bring the gray head of our father down to the grave in sorrow. 32 Your servant guaranteed the boy’s safety to my father. I said, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, I will bear the blame before you, my father, all my life!

Now then, please let your servant remain here as my lord’s slave in place of the boy, and let the boy return with his brothers. How can I go back to my father is the boy is not with me? No! Do not let me see the misery that would come on my father.”

This is the Word of the Lord.

As the story of Jacob's family, God's chosen family, continues, we see the character of the sons developing in interesting ways. Scripture gives us these stories for a reason, the way that the characters develop is important to pay attention to, as it is showing something about our own hearts, and how God might heal us of our sin.

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The problem being looked at in this chapter has to do with resolving the effects of sin in families. The problem goes right back to the beginning of not only Jospeh's story, but the story of humanity. In the beginning God creates humanity male and female, and ordains the marriage covenant as a means to bring them together and fill the world that he has created for them with families. As we see today, when things are working as they should, marriage results in children, and we welcome these children into God's covenant community through the sacrament of baptism.

But, as we all experience, as Adam and Eve bring sin into the world and we all continue to do so, one of the worst things this sin does is tear apart the family structure that God ordained for his world. One of the ways sin effects our world is through sibling rivalry, sibling jealousy. In God's covenant family alone, we see that out of sibling rivalry Cain murders his brother Abel, Ishmael is cast out, Jacob is estranged from Esau. Out of sibling rivalry, the sons of Jacob, sell their brother into slavery. What can heal this wound? Is there a true path forward?

This story of Joseph and his brothers in these chapters proposes a way forward, a better path. This path forward has to do with confession and forgiveness. We will begin by looking at Judah's transformation through confession, and then next Sunday look at Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers. These two things must go together in healing family relationships.

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In this story, Judah becomes prominent. Those who know the whole story of Scripture will anticipate that Judah will become preeminent over his brothers. The tribe of Judah will remain somewhat more faithful to God, while the other tribes wander away more quickly. From his line will come the Kingly line of David, and the promised Messiah. This is all prophesied later on in Genesis 49, in Jacob's blessing. As we might expect, knowing the way God has ordered his Word, there is a glimpse of the future glory here, even an anticipation of the lordship of Christ.

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In this chapter, Judah is seen as being the responsible and faithful son, speaking reason to his aged father, who seems faithless and anxious at the thought of losing his new favourite son, Benjamin. This new responsible leader comes as something of a surprise in the story, as this is not how Judah was pictured previously. Judah is the youngest of the children of Leah, the unwanted wife that Jacob was tricked into marrying. By birth, he should not amount to anything.

However, it does seem that Judah has some natural leadership ability, as in chapter 37, he does convince his brothers not to kill Joseph, but to merely sell him into slavery instead. This does not exactly make him a saint, but it does make him slightly more noble than his brothers.

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Judah's transformation begins in the story that comes right after Joseph being sold to slavery. The story tells of Judah being impetuous, fearful, and lustful. After leaving his father's house (already a bad sign), Judah marries a Canaanite, something that his ancestors were warned not to do, and that he would have been warned about.

This unwise marriage leads to wicked sons, so wicked that God puts them to death directly for their sin. After the first is put to death for unknown reasons, the second is put to death for not taking proper care of his widowed sister-in-law, Tamar, in providing offspring for her. In this culture a widowed and childless woman would be destitute in old age, children were a social security. Judah himself is also guilty of the same sin, as he withholds his youngest son from the woman who has left his other two sons in the ground.

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Judah is tricked into caring for his daughter-in-law Tamar through some unscrupulous means, but it seems they are justified. Judah, for his part, does confess his guilt in the ordeal, and it seems to have changed him. He dramatically states, "she is more righteous than I!" The process of losing two of his sons directly at the hand of God, and being confronted with his own sin, have left Judah a humbled man. Judah is able to see that God is in control, which is the same wisdom that Joseph needed before Pharaoh, and that it is foolish to go against him or to try and hide his sin from him.

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It is out of this humility before God, that Judah is able to speak reason to his father in a desperate time. Jacob is fearful of going back to get more food as Joseph had held Simeon back and required Benjamin to come as proof of the brother's story. If Jacob wants to give food to his family, he must risk the life of Benjamin, his favourite son.

In this fear we might see a contrast with the faith of his grandfather Abraham. When Abraham was asked to sacrifice Isaac, he went faithfully, knowing that the promised child would be kept by God in some way. This should be a foundational story for Jacob, considering it happened to his own father. Judah had already learned the hard way that he should not have put is trust in his children but in God, as Abraham did. Jacob, even though he received the same promise directly from God, does not trust that Benjamin will be kept safe.

It is only when Judah pleads with Jacob to allow Benjamin to go, saying that he will ensure his safety with his own life that Jacob allows for this to happen. Ruben had done something similar in the in the previous chapter, guaranteeing the life of Benjamin with the lives of his own sons. It seems only the thing that eventually causes Jacob to change his mind is the drawn-out famine. Maybe the famine causes Jacob to put his hope in God and his promises, as the grief of losing his sons and being caught in his sin, appears to have changed Judah. The famine then is God reminding Jacob who orders the world, and who is dependent.

If Jacob had more faith, like Abraham, he would have been spared the pangs of hunger as he would have been able to simply go down to Egypt knowing that God would care for him. But, as is often the case for us, we need to experience pain in order to see our need for God. God has our eternal well-being in mind, and not simply the goods we might experience here and now. A famine is a terrible thing to endure, losing one's soul infinitely worse.

The text seems to be showing how the lies in the family are coming home to roost. There is distrust between Jacob and his sons, and this distrust is causing them all to forget about the promises of God for their family, that they are to be a blessing to the nations and have nothing to fear in going down to Egypt.

Jacob must know there is something up with the story of how Joseph was supposedly killed. When Jacob sees the silver for the grain returned in the son's bags, but their brother Simeon missing, maybe it reminded him of when Jospeh went missing. At that time too the brothers would have come back with some silver from the sale of their brother. There is at least an air of suspicion over the family. Maybe Joseph had this in mind the whole time when he ordered the silver to be returned with his brothers, hoping to remind them of what had happened to him when they left him in slavery.

I like to think that Jacob's heart is finally put at ease when he sees Judah plead to go and pledge his life if anything happens to Benjamin. Maybe Jacob remembers the whole affair with Tamar, and how Judah's attempt to save his own son's life caused much pain. Judah's

faith gives Jacob what he needs, and he is able to allow his son to risk death, trusting in "Almighty God" as he sends them.

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When the brothers arrive in Egypt, they are welcomed to a dinner with their host. This would have been very unsettling, but Joseph seems friendly enough, and inquisitive of their family and especially their father. At the dinner, Joseph puzzlingly gives his brother Benjamin five times the portion as the other brothers.

Considering the jealousy that the other brothers had over Joseph, we might imagine they felt the same way towards Benjamin when their father seems to be favouring him, not caring if they are sent to their deaths, but protective of little Benny. But this is not how they respond. It seems Joseph even tests this jealousy in giving Benjamin five times the portion that the others received. They don't seem to care and are able to enjoy the feast.

This small dinner test is then exponentially increased in the silver cup test. Here Joseph really wants to test the hearts of his brothers, so he places his silver divining cup in the bag of Benjamin, framing him for theft. Joseph repeatedly says this cup was used for 'divination', that is, as a means of prophecy. As Joseph had been given in his prophetic dreams, where he had prominence over his brothers, he wants to paint Benjamin in the same light. Jospeh is tempting the brothers with as close to a situation as he can with Benjamin. If Benjamin was stealing this particular cup, it is likely that the brothers would think he is trying to use it to promote his own supremacy over them as Joseph did.

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It is here that Judah really rises to the occasion, acting like the hero that will come from his descendants, and modelling the repentance that we are all called to. Instead of falling into the same line of envy that got the brothers into this mess, Judah repents. The climax of Judah's story comes when Judah says to Joseph, "God has uncovered your servant's guilt. We are now my lord's slaves…" Judah, like Joseph, recognizes God's hand in what is going on, and it allows him to accept his place, and thus bring healing.

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In Judah's speech to Joseph, he further shows his remorse for what happened to Joseph, emphasizing how Jacob has been grieved for all this time. In Judah's speech we also see a remarkable humility in his willingness to serve his father, who clearly favours his other brothers over him. Judah was likely hurt in how Jacob said in v.27, "my wife bore me two sons…" Jacob only speaks about Rachel as his wife, and not Judah's own mother. Judah

recounts his father saying how Jacob will die if Benjamin is not returned, something he does not say about Judah when he offers his life in exchange if it does not work out.

Remember, Judah didn't even know that Benjamin was innocent of the theft of the cup. For all he knew his little brother stole this cup. And yet, Judah keeps his word and offers himself in the place of Benjamin. Where once envy ruled Judah, now he is willing to confess his sin and sacrifice his own well-being for the good of his brother, who may be plotting to be the next Joseph for all Judah knows. Judah once despised the will of God, seen in Joseph's dreams, when it meant his brother would gain prominence over him, but now he willingly puts himself in the place of a servant.

In this we see how God provides a better path through sibling rivalry. All over Scripture, and all over our own lives, we see that God blesses people in ways we can only say is unfair. In families, in society, this jealousy can tear relationships apart. Cain is jealous that God delights in Abel's sacrifice and would rather kill him than accept his place. How has this same reasoning infected our families? My brother is popular, and I'm alone. My sister is getting married, when I'm the older one. How come my sister's kids are so well behaved and mine are terrible? Why are they so healthy, and I have to go through this? It goes on and on.

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But the story of Joseph invites us to a different vantagepoint. It invites us to see our lives as ordered by God. And so, we ask, what are we called to do with what God has given us? If we are the blessed sibling, we are called to be a blessing. To serve those around us who are not given what we have. Health, prosperity, and status are a blessing from God, and a blessing is a responsibility, just as Joseph does when he is given the opportunity. Joseph is blessed greatly, and his responsibility to serve is great too.

Likewise, if we feel like we got the short straw in life, this is not helped in jealousy and bitterness, but in allowing the other to exercise the gift given to them. No good will come in trying to usurp the position given to another. The envy you harbour in your heart will not breed good things; Scripture makes this very clear.

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It also makes it clear that what the world views as great things are not necessarily great in the kingdom of God. Jesus makes this very clear in the beatitudes, blessed are the meek, the grieving, the poor. Often our jealousy of the apparent blessing of our siblings causes us to be blind to the way God is blessing us in a greater way through trials which prepare us for eternity.

Slide 37

This is seen in the life of Judah. Judah ironically becomes a true leader when seeing himself as a servant. In being willing to sacrifice himself for his brother, he undoes the evil that he and his brothers did in the past, where he sacrificed someone else for his good. He is able to look past what his brother might have done, and look past his father's faults, and he is willing to bear the punishment himself. This is the model of leadership that we will see time and again in Scripture.

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And this is exactly what we see in our Lord, who is the ultimate servant king. As Paul says, "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; [7] rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant…" (Phil.2:6-7a). It is this that gives Judah pre-eminence over his brothers, and why God chooses the tribe of Judah to bring our Lord.

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This is the servant leadership we too are called to model. Peter says this to the leaders in the church, "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not pursuing dishonest gain, but eager to serve; [3] not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1Pet.5:2-3).

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And likewise, to those not blessed with leadership, Peter says, "In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble." [6] Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

When we trust that God has all things in his hands, we are free to accept our place and live in faithfulness with what he has given us. Both to be generous when we are blessed with resources and abilities, and to content to submit when our place is not. This allows us to receive God's healing in our families, curing the root of our envy with one another.

Let's Pray.