

“It Will Get Better”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Genesis 45:1-11

New Testament lesson: Romans 8:35, 37-39

A rabbi once counseled a couple who came to him because the wife was complaining her husband would not take out the trash. She asked the rabbi if there was anything in Jewish law that compelled the husband to do this simple chore.

“Sadly there is not,” said the rabbi, and the couple went on their way. The next morning, the rabbi showed up at their house. The man was overjoyed, “Please Rabbi, come in, have something to eat – what an honor!” “No,” said the rabbi, “I’ve just come to take out the trash.” The man looked puzzled, so the rabbi explained, “You see, it may be beneath your dignity, but it is not beneath mine.”¹

Now that’s humility. Joseph in today’s Old Testament reading had such humility, and more. Joseph displays numerous qualities that are essential for the health of our families, our society, and our world.

Joseph has been through a lot – nearly killed by his brothers, thrown into a pit to die, hauled out and sold into slavery, and then falsely accused and imprisoned in Egypt. And believe it or not, God was alongside him through it all. Joseph never let life’s struggle change who he was inside – the person God created him to be – and it was this faithfulness that not only brought him through but kept him firmly on the path God laid out for him.

We all have our own path in life. And the hardest part is not getting knocked off the path, keeping the faith and moving forward even through the toughest situations, and most of all, staying true to who we are – who God would have us be – even when we’re sure things are not going well at all, that it just couldn’t get any worse.

Have you ever heard those “Oh, that’s good; No, that’s bad” jokes. Some have; some haven’t. Don’t worry, you’re not missing much. But there is a children’s book titled “That’s Good! That’s Bad!,” written by Margery Cuyler. “That’s Good! That’s Bad!” is used as a devotional by retreat leader Andrée Seu Peterson, who says the book is a great tie-in with the story of Joseph. “He begins life as his father’s favorite. (Oh! That’s good! No, that’s bad.),” says Peterson. “Jealousy drives his brothers to sell him to a traveling band of Ishmaelites, who sell him to a slave auction. (Oh, that’s bad. No, that’s good.)

¹ Rabbi Gifter of the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland, as told by David Wolpe, *Off the Pulpit* e-newsletter for April 28, 2011. sinaitemple.org/learning_with_the_rabbis/writings/index.php. Retrieved February 3, 2014.

A high government official buys Joseph off the auction block and is so impressed with the young Hebrew's management skills that he makes him his right-hand man. (Oh, that's good. No, that's bad.) The official's wife falsely accuses Joseph of sexual harassment and he lands in prison. (Oh, that's bad. No, that's good.)

He is promoted in prison, and in the course of his duties he interprets a dream for Pharaoh's butler, who promises to put in a good word for the innocent Joseph. (Oh, that's good. No, that's bad.) The butler forgets his promise. (Oh, that's bad. No, that's good.) Two years later, Pharaoh has a dream and wants an interpreter and the butler remembers Joseph. (Oh, that's good.) Yes," says Peterson, "that's very, very good, because Joseph rises through the ranks to become the second to Pharaoh in Egypt, and God uses his connections to save his father and brothers from famine in Canaan, and to bring them down to Egypt where they are ... prepared as a special people through whom God will bring salvation to the world." God was alongside Joseph through it all, down in the pit and in Pharaoh's court.

We all go through ups and downs in life – some of them devastating! When we're at our lowest it's hard to imagine things getting much better. But things can get better, and will. Joseph shows us that. If you want to know how to not only survive but to thrive amid life's ups and downs, look to Joseph. Joseph displays three key qualities that make him who he is – qualities he never compromised on, no matter how bad things got.

The first quality we see in Joseph is compassion and forgiveness. After being reunited with the brothers who sold him into slavery, Joseph draws close to them and says, "I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." Now at this point, it could go in one of two ways – anger and revenge or compassion and forgiveness. Remember, Joseph has the power of Pharaoh and is in a unique position to seek revenge, which of course is never pretty.

But Joseph, as wronged as he was by his brothers, does not carry a grudge. Instead of being angry at his brothers, Joseph considers the situation and is amazed by God's faithfulness. In the same breath, he says to his brothers, "... Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

Talk about forgiveness! It's forgiveness like that that can save us from years of resentment and a heart full of anger and regret. Joseph is a forgiving soul – always was. And he didn't let life's ups and downs rob him of that. And neither should we. Forgiveness is a key quality for us as Christians – for you as a family member, as a student or coworker, as a neighbor in your community or at church. If we don't forgive others, it's hard to stay on track with God.

The second quality we see in Joseph is vision and faith. Joseph is put in charge of protecting Pharaoh's land and the people who live there. And then there's a famine – a seven-year famine.

Here's another time in his life when it could go one of two ways – discouragement or faith. Joseph knew that God did not bring him this far to sink into despair because of hard times.

No. Instead, Joseph says, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.” Joseph didn't let dark times cloud his vision or dampen his faith, and neither should we.

We may not have dreams come to us in our sleep like Joseph, assuring him of God's hand in all of this. But we have something Joseph didn't. We have the story of God's people given to us in Holy Scripture. The Bible and the stories it contains are given for us to use, to learn from, to lean on, to live into.

When you face tragedy beyond your control, don't lose faith. Turn to scripture. There you will encounter stories full of insight and vision and faith. There you will find God's promise to you – to us – as the spiritual descendants of Jacob and Isaac and Abraham. Their stories are our stories, too. Their faith is our faith. It will not let you down.

The third quality Joseph shows us is care and concern, for others. “Hurry and go up to my father” says Joseph and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there....’”

Joseph is not only a good steward of the land and people in his care, but of all the earth, all creation. By showing care and concern for those nearest to him, Joseph ensures the care and protection of all people. Joseph is key in God's plan, from the beginning and into the future, our future.

Genesis began with God calling his creation “good,” and through people like Joseph, God makes it good again – and again, and again if need be – no matter how many times we mess thing up, no matter how long it takes to redeem and perfect creation. It will get better – always – thanks to God's almighty power, God's gracious and merciful heart, and God's unsearchable, divine wisdom.

There is so much in life we can't control. The world we live in is so uncertain, particularly at this point in history. But one thing that is certain is that as long as there are people of compassion and forgiveness, vision and faith, care and concern we need not worry about the future. God has this.

In the midst of any trouble or discouragement you may be facing, God has this.

That is God's promise as revealed to us through the stories of the Bible, as given to us through the Living Word of God, as lived out by us through our connection to the church and its outreach to the world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Loving and merciful God, in this quiet moment, we ask that you align the hearts of your people with yours, that we may submit to your will in all things.

There is so much in life we don't understand, particularly the death of our loved ones from something as evil as cancer.

Fear and doubt try so hard to keep us from trusting your goodness. So, we ask that you help each one here today release their fears and doubts, turn them over to you, trusting in your goodness, always.

We pray for all those battling disease and illness, and for their family and friends journeying alongside them.

We pray, too, that you would help us, O Lord. When we are struck with uncertainty, let us feel your presence and be remind of your faithfulness.

We pray all this in the name of the One who was faithful even unto death, Jesus the Christ, who taught us to pray together, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**