

Come Closer To Me
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Genesis 45:1-15

In last week's lection, Joseph's brothers saw him from a distance, and he them. And though the text never says so, I think it's fair to believe that both parties were happy to keep their distance from one another.

Distance gives us separation: space from anxiety and discomfort and conflict.

For Jacob's sons, life was easier in the distance. When the dreamer was there, the tension hung over his brothers like a fog. But when Joseph left the room, the fog lifted, and shoulders loosened.

The same was true for Joseph. He could sense his brothers' displeasure with him. In his presence, their bodies stiffened and their faces looked stern, even ready for a fight. And he could feel his stomach churn – he was definitely an outsider in their presence. And he longed for space.

Put me somewhere, God, anywhere, God – anywhere but here!!!

From a distance, we need not fear our brother; From a distance, we need not empathize with our sister's needs; From a distance, we need not transform or evolve, because our neighbors are too far away to provoke our discomfort; From a distance, we get to be righteous; From a distance, it's someone else's problem; From a distance, it's all for the best.

That's where I think we left Jacob's sons last week. Here was a group of brothers who took the easy way out. You go your way, we'll go ours. And if along the way somebody harms you, well, we've washed our hands of it all.

The distance makes it easier, because our enemies' sense of humanity is barely noticeable on the far-off horizon.

But over the next eight chapters, something happens. Joseph and his brothers no longer seek distance. Instead, they long for nearness.

Despite being sold into slavery, God protects Joseph, and he eventually becomes the second-most powerful man in Egypt. And during the famine, his brothers, who do not yet recognize Joseph, will unknowingly seek his assistance. The story reveals the brothers' regret in their treatment of Joseph, and Joseph's longing to reconnect with his family.

At the story's climax, Joseph proclaims to his brothers: "Come closer to me. I am your brother, Joseph!"

And here's what I think: distance can do a lot of things, but it cannot make us whole.

As the years passed by, Joseph learned that no amount of far-away treasure in a far-away land could surpass the wealth of reconciliation. He missed his family. And his brothers learned that no amount of time, no amount of distance could sooth the sting of regret. They mourned the loss of their brother.

Distance had given them space. Distance had given them a pause.

But distance had not offered them a resolution.

Only nearness could do that. Joseph let down his guard, offered his brothers an embrace, and sought shalom. And weeping, his brothers gladly accepted. And his brothers drew near, close enough to touch.

And somehow, somehow, their differences were no longer what defined them. Instead, they remembered that each of them were Jacob's boys. And each of them belonged to a God who is bigger than petty bitterness, or the cruelty of slave-traders, or the emptiness of consumerism.

And so in a foreign land those familiar faces were reconciled to and with one another.

Now we can't mention the Joseph novella without mentioning providence. The text tells us that all of Joseph's experiences were the result of divine providence – Joseph endured all of this tragedy so that God's power and God's plan might become evident, and made known for generations.

Joseph himself tells his brothers not to despair: Your actions placed me in the position God wanted me to be in so that our family could survive and thrive. And now, look at us!

Joseph, and the writer of this story are entitled to their opinions. Perhaps this is how God works.

But, respectfully, I disagree with Joseph's assessment.

God may be providential, but God is neither cruel nor calculating. I cannot and I will not believe that God shakes a magic 8-ball, conjuring up schemes for cosmic salvation.

God didn't enslave Joseph, and God didn't jail Joseph, and God didn't bring about famine in Egypt all to prove a point, any more than God nailed a Nazarean to a cross to wipe out the sins of humanity.

For reasons we will never be able to explain, humanity has the capacity to cause great harm. And in every age, there are forces ready to seize upon hate in order to extract the full venom of such harm. It happens on micro and macro levels.

But I will not attribute that hate toward God. I won't and I can't because the idea of hate and evil goes against my every inclination about the nature and character of our Creator.

God is love. And God is good. And God is constant. And this is what's providential about God: No matter the circumstance, no matter the manifestation of hate, no matter the cruel fate of the universe, God never stops being present. And God is always working, always moving to make reconciliation a reality.

That's the miracle. That's the providence. God's grace seeps into the messiness and the unexpectedness of life (whether we want it to or not!). And it says that shalom is still possible, even among brothers who discard their relationships. It says that shalom can close the gap between Dothan and Shechem.

After the week we've had, it's imperative to place providence in its proper perspective.

I do not believe that God dressed up Klansmen and put them in Charlottesville last week so that preachers would prophesy on Facebook this week. Nor do I believe that God saw fit to weaponize automobiles and kill innocent pedestrians and protestors so that the world might be shocked into civility and compassion. And nor do I believe that God whips up natural disasters or inserts vengeful, incompetent leaders into deserving communities. To believe such things is to put too much distance between ourselves and God. And to believe such things is to contradict the nature and character of our God.

But we can't sugarcoat it. Evil exists and persists.

As people of faith, what we must determine is whether we will be passive bystanders to evil, or whether we'll be active instigators of peace and love and justice.

All summer long, we've listened to stories of women and men who have been instigators of justice.

The three young men dared the fiery furnace to do its worst. The daughters of Zelophehad stood up to an antiquated system. Zacchaeus opened his heart to a different kind of kingdom. Dorcas didn't simply lament the grief and poverty of widows, she set about using her gifts to embolden and empower her neighbors. A Samaritan asked, "What will happen to this man if I do not help him?" Joseph trusted in God's deliverance more than he feared in the power of masters and jailers and rulers. And Joseph and his brothers discovered the wholeness and transformation of forgiveness. And the Christ we follow, stared into the teeth of Rome, and proclaimed "there is a better way! Life is not about acquisition and competition, but rather it's about enough-ness and inclusion and cooperation."

In every situation, God did not create the circumstance, rather God helped to inspire the solution. And notice, that none of these of solutions involved the smiting of enemies, the enforcement of revenge, or the severing of relationships. On some level, each of our stories this summer concluded with communal reconciliation – families, neighborhoods, and other systems, where all parties were made whole, where all parties thrived in the enough-ness of God's provisions.

Outside of our doors, we face a world in crisis, one still reeling from the festering wounds of classism and racism. And each week, we challenge ourselves to drink up God's spirit and do kindness in the world.

To be honest, all week, I was hoping I could conclude this sermon by offering you a prescription for what such kindness looks like – a kindness that would instantly cure the hurt we feel from the events of last week. Maybe each of us could make placard, write two Facebook rants, call our Congressman, and deliver a loaf of banana bread to our biggest enemies. And by Friday, everyone would be singing *I'd like to buy the World a Coke*.

Sadly, I have no such prescription. So I'll offer you something clumsy and incomplete, but still something of value and authenticity.

The stories of our faith, remind us that the swirling spirit of God is providential – it has its mind set on soothing conflict, not creating it. And that spirit is gonna infuse God's people. And when such an infusion occurs, distances are erased.

And so this morning, I offer you things:

- 1) My sincere hope that God's spirit will infuse each of us in the same way it has infused the saints of old.
- 2) My sincere faith and confidence, that God's spirit will infuse us, and when that spirit swirls all around us, we will be a people who are not set on being apart, but one who are bound for togetherness.

Friends, God spirit is close. So close. And as it draws near, so too will the distance of our enemies.

And maybe, one day, we too, like Joseph, will proclaim, "Come closer to me. I am your brother. And I am your sister."

May it be so. And may it be soon. Amen.