

“Bearded Blessings”
Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
August 20, 2023

Genesis 45:1-15
Psalm 133

How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

*It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes.*

*It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the Lord ordained his blessing, life forevermore.*

The Psalmist who wrote these words probably knew something of people not getting along, folks not sharing the spirit of unity or not sharing anything at all. Sometimes, our deepest longings come from that which we have yet to see or experience— or for something we once had, but which was lost to us.

Aaron, whom the Psalm mentions by name, was the brother to Moses and Miriam. Moses was the leader who brought forward God’s liberation for the Hebrew people, from slavery in Egypt, to freedom— which included 40 years of wandering through the wilderness. Miriam led the crossing of the Red Sea, singing what we believe to be the earliest words printed in the Bible. Aaron was the priest among the people, and also the communicator for Moses, who often stumbled over speech. The role of communicator was important, because in those years of wandering through the wilderness, there was lots of grumbling and complaints.

In fact, Aaron wore a breastplate, as described in Exodus, sewn of gold woven into his ephod, and embedded into this breastplate were 12 gems— each inscribed with the name of one of the 12 tribes of Israel— that is, the 12 sons of Jacob. Like a mother hen gathering her chicks upon her breast, Aaron gathered the 12 tribes of Israel upon his; this physical representation of the unity of Israel reminded the people that they were all in this struggle together, and each one had a role in bringing forward the covenant God was making with the people.

We know already that these 12 brothers have some history. Last week we learned of how Joseph, the second youngest, was thrown into a pit by his brothers, and then sold off into Egypt. At first, it seemed dire for Joseph. He was imprisoned after his master’s wife tried to seduce him, and declining her. But God was with him.

Wil Gafney is a womanist biblical scholar, meaning she brings her perspective as a black woman in search of liberation to scripture. She warns preachers not to paint a theological gloss over the traumas and harm of human trafficking and enslavement. I don’t want to be like a

certain curriculum in Florida, which implied that some *good* came out of slavery by stating that enslaved persons learned “skills” that could be “used for their personal benefit.” It is historically inaccurate to imply that lives and livelihoods were improved by forced labor and captivated bodies. Certainly, the Egyptian Pharaoh imprisoned and executed many other people as he well pleased.

But Joseph was an exception— not due to any benefit of his enslavement or goodwill from his enslavers, but to his exceptional power to accurately interpret dreams, which in biblical times and maybe today was seen as a gift from God.

Have you ever had a dream that was a gift from God? It happened once for me, decades ago, and I can still feel the sensations from that dream.

It turns out Pharaoh had been troubled by a strange dream: 7 sleek, fat cows grazed by the Nile. Then, 7 thin, ugly cows came, and they swallowed up the 7 fattened cows. He had another dream: 7 plump ears of corn, and 7 withered and blighted ears of corn. The 7 withered ears ate the 7 plump ears.

Joseph, who in prison had gained a reputation as a dream interpreter, was summoned to Pharaoh. He interpreted Pharaoh’s dreams: the land will have 7 years of agricultural abundance. But they will be followed by 7 years of famine.

Pharaoh decided that Joseph was discerning and wise, and so put him in charge of the land and its resources. Not only that: he supplied Joseph with fine garments and a chariot, an Egyptian name— Zaphenath-paneah and an Egyptian wife, Asenath. Someone just last week asked me what God thinks about interfaith marriages, and here is an example: the woman Joseph married was the daughter of the Egyptian, pagan priest, and their children continued as great tribal leaders for the Hebrew people. Without interfaith marriage, so many of our biblical role models would never have existed. With care and mutual respect, that can still be true today.

As for Joseph, he proved to be an excellent steward. In the 7 years of abundance, Joseph stored up food beyond measure in every city. So when the famine came, Egypt had so much stored that even the other nations were flocking to them, to beg for food.

When Joseph’s brothers traveled all the way from Canaan, to beg for food for themselves and to bring back to their father and their household, they did not recognize Joseph. Perhaps it was the beard: they had last seen him as a bare-faced youth, and now, he had grown to a man, probably with a beard. They had last seen him humiliated and destitute, sold as a slave. But now he had been granted the Pharaoh’s power of voice and held charge over Egypt’s resources of precious food. How could they possibly have recognized him?

But beneath his beard, Joseph knew exactly who they were. Even though he spoke the Egyptian language and relied on a translator to speak to his brothers, he knew exactly what they

were saying in response. He gave them a series of tests: to see if they had changed. Were they honest? Did they value their other brothers? Did they have remorse for what they did?

Joseph had not forgotten. But he was ready to forgive. The events of the years had changed him, and now he came from a position of power. Those years had changed his brothers too, it had seemed— from ruthless and jealous, to empathetic and responsible.

But there is more to it. Did Joseph recognize that God's hand of salvation was at work through him and his story? Sometimes, it is only after a long and stony road that we can look back and say, "I can see it. I can see where God was at work in my story, and praise God, I have come this far by faith." So, Joseph revealed who he was to his clueless brothers. They were greatly distressed, because they knew how awful they had been to Joseph. But he responded with grace: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life... and to keep alive for you many survivors."

Maybe seeing that big picture enabled Joseph to forgive. It provided him the way back to his brothers on a path they had broken. Not only that— when he shared with Pharaoh that *this* was his family, Pharaoh granted all of them, including those still in Canaan, a generous amount of land, livestock, and many other goods. They settled in Egypt, and for many generations, they thrived.

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound! Joseph's brothers did not deserve the forgiveness Joseph granted them. And yet, with the truth of the brothers' harmful actions exposed between them, forgiveness is exactly what Joseph gave.

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I picture Aaron, checking out the 12 gemstones on his breastplate. Each one shimmers, because the value of each sibling is affirmed. It doesn't stay like that for the descendents of Jacob, of Israel. But the memory is there, and it gives the descendents something to long for.

I want to ask you if there is a relationship in your life that has brokenness, with no visible path of return. It could be in your family, or in your friendships. It could even be the brokenness so many of us know, feel, and even embody in this country. If you know a brokenness like this, and *if* you know this brokenness **but also** feel a longing for peace, for unity, for reconciliation, I invite you— whether you have done wrong, or been wronged, to pray for that relationship and ask God to help reveal to you a way back.

Know that for Joseph, it took decades before he was ready, and conditions were right, for him to forgive. If he had stayed in Pharaoh's prison, he may have never gotten there. If he was in a

place where his brothers could have victimized him further, he may have never gotten there. Forgiveness should not have to put you in a place where people can continue to do you harm. As a church that advocates for survivors of domestic violence, I want to state that clearly: you don't have to forgive in a way that puts you in harm's pathways again.

But even when such precautions are made, forgiveness still *is* risky. No beard can protect you from the risk of putting your trust and love out there. As we consider how we can be wise stewards of resources— just as Joseph was over the stores of grain that kept Egypt and surrounding countries fed and healthful even through a famine— we can be wise stewards of our love and of our trust. If we take care of these precious resources, we can find that there will be enough of these to share when the time is right.

There is never a famine of God's love and care for us. As we access this, may we consider how we might also share it.