

First Presbyterian Church
Genesis 37:29-36, “Naming the Hurt”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 1/31/2021

I often get stories from crying boys:

“I was just balancing on that chair and reaching up
for a branch in the tree and then for no reason I fell!”
“He just thinks that he can do whatever he wants
and tell me what to do but he’s not the boss of me!”

There are other examples, but those will suffice. Telling the story
of what has happened to us (or what we have done to ourselves)
is important – it’s the first step in the fourfold path of forgiveness.

If you’re wondering what the other steps look like,
I’ll share this image adapted from the book.
The image includes both the revenge cycle
(which we unfortunately don’t have time to explore)
and the fourfold path of forgiveness.

The next step is to *specifically* name the hurt.

When I’m told a story like that, I often ask a follow up question like,
“Okay, so where exactly does your leg ... stomach ... arm ... head ... hurt?”
“Is it a sharp pain or a dull pain?”
“Can you move it like this?”
You’d be surprised how often the answer is pretty vague.
“I don’t know where, it just hurts!”

Poking and prodding by parents is rarely appreciated,
but for us to help the pain to go away – or figure out if this wound
is above our pay grade – we need to get them to the place
where they can say more specifically what the hurt is like.

I have many different stories of being hurt that I can tell.
My mom died when I was 21. My dad had Alzheimer’s
and died three years ago.
The pandemic has changed so much
about how my family works, plays,
and connects with others.

The power plays in our national politics
have thrown the concept of truth up for grabs.
Our country seems to have passed on the opportunity
to significantly address the history of racism in our society.

These are among the painful stories I can tell
– and some of them are shared by us all.
They don't play well together, and sometimes they
latch onto each other in weird ways.

But telling these stories isn't the same thing as naming why and how they hurt.
That's why "Naming the Hurt" gets its own step in the fourfold path.

Telling the story gets the facts out there – at least the facts as we understand them.
Then what?
Then we have to go deeper and name specifically the pain, hurt,
and enmeshed feelings that are knotted up inside of us.

So such and such a thing happened to you.
What are the feelings generated in you by that event?

Naming them helps us to understand what we are really dealing with,
to disambiguate one pain from another,
and shine some disinfecting sunlight on those old wounds.

Am I feeling betrayed?
Disappointed? Ignored?
Abused? Neglected?
Taken for granted? Disrespected?
Ganged-up on? Ashamed? Powerless?
These are all unique forms of pain.

Naming the hurt is important but difficult work.

Desmond and Mpho Tutu write, "We give voice to our hurts not to be victims
or martyrs, but to find freedom from the resentment, anger, shame,
or self-loathing that can fester and build inside us
when we do not touch our pain and learn to forgive."

We see some of the challenges of naming the hurt
in the passage that we've read today.

Earlier in the chapter, Joseph – who regularly boasted about his favored status in front of his brothers – was sent by his father Jacob to check up on them as they tended flocks far away.

But when they saw him coming with his special coat,
they stripped him of it, threw him into an empty cistern,
and sold him into slavery.

Some of the brothers even wanted to kill Joseph, but Rueben, the oldest of all 12, wanted to save him and planned to help him escape from the cistern.

Unfortunately (and perhaps conveniently?)
he wasn't there when the other brothers sold Joseph as a slave.

Why wasn't the eldest around for such an important decision?
We are left with no answers to that question.

But when he comes back and find the cistern empty
he goes back to the other brothers and cries out, "Now where will I turn?"

Interesting. Is he saying, "Where will I turn to help my younger brother Joseph?"
Or is he saying, "Where will I turn to keep from being held responsible
for this treachery?"

The group of them turn immediately to a cover-up plan,
which adds hurt on top of hurt.
Not only do they ruin Joseph's life, they will also lie about it
to the rest of the family – there will be a secret among them
festering like an infected abscess.

They dip Joseph's robe in goat blood and bring it back to their father, Jacob,
and simply say, "We found this. Examine it to see whether
it is your son's robe."

There's some irony here. Because Jacob
also used tricks to get ahead of his brother Esau.
Back in Gen. 27 we get the story of Jacob
tricking his blind father Isaac by fixing up food
just as Esau would have made it,

and putting wool on his arms so they would feel hairy and rough
just like Esau's arms,
and then convincing blind Isaac to bless the younger Jacob
rather than his brother Esau.

So now the old trickster Jacob about to be tricked by his own sons.
Something could be said here about the proximity
of apples that have fallen from trees.
“We found this,” his sons say. They cleverly allow Jacob
to invent the story himself while his sons play dumb.

He doesn't question them and suggests for himself that Joseph
must have been ripped to pieces by fierce animals.

The pain is intense. Though he doesn't have the true story,
Jacob does name the hurt, such as he is able to.
And oh, how he hurts.
He rips his clothes to match the ripped coat
of his son Joseph,
and he refuses to be comforted.

It hurts bad. But in fact, it's worse than what he imagines.
Not only is Joseph lost to him, but the people trying to comfort him
are the ones responsible for Joseph's disappearance.

This is wickedness masquerading as kindness.

And that old favoritism is still on display –
Jacob refuses to be consoled until he's dead.
Because it's not just anyone who has died, but Joseph his favorite.

Telling the story and naming the hurt aren't magic wands.
They don't make everything better. But they get us started down the road.

What about us? Have we told the story?
Do we have all the information we need?
In some ways we never have complete knowledge of others'
motivations and actions.

So, taking what information we have, can we name the hurt?

We have wisdom from the Tutus about why this is so difficult and so important:

“We must do everything possible to dig the hurt out at the very roots
that have bound us to it for so long. And the only way to reach the taproot
is with the truth.

It has often been said that we are as sick as the secrets we keep.

Often the initial harm done to us is compounded by our own shame
and silence about what we have suffered. ...

We are not responsible for what breaks us, but we can be responsible
for what puts us back together again.”

We can only name what we know and experience,
including our own faults and inadequacies.

Guess what? God’s with us in the middle of all that.

Jesus, the man of sorrows, knows the pain you feel.

Jesus knows the names of your wounds.

And if you let him near, he will help you name them as well.

I will close again with this revealing poem from the Book of Forgiving:

*Meet me here
Speak my name
I am not your enemy
I am your teacher
I may even be your friend
Let us tell our truth together, you and I
My name is anger: I say you have been wronged
My name is shame: my story is your hidden pain
My name is fear: my story is vulnerability
My name is resentment: I say things should have been different
My name is grief
My name is depression
My name is heartache
My name is anxiety
I have many names
And many lessons
I am not your enemy
I am your teacher*