

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13

¹If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. ²And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. ³If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

⁴Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant ⁵or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; ⁶it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. ⁷It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

⁸Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. ⁹For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; ¹⁰but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. ¹¹When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. ¹²For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. ¹³And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

GENESIS 42-43

When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, 'Why do you keep looking at one another? ²I have heard', he said, 'that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die.' ³So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. ⁴But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. ⁵Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan.

⁶ Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. ⁷When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. 'Where do you come from?' he said. They said, 'From the land of Canaan, to buy food.' ⁸Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. ⁹Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, 'You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!' ¹⁰They said to him, 'No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. ¹¹We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants

have never been spies.’¹² But he said to them, ‘No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!’¹³ They said, ‘We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more.’¹⁴ But Joseph said to them, ‘It is just as I have said to you; you are spies!’¹⁵ Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here!¹⁶ Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies.’¹⁷ And he put them all together in prison for three days.

18 On the third day Joseph said to them, ‘Do this and you will live, for I fear God: ¹⁹if you are honest men, let one of your brothers stay here where you are imprisoned. The rest of you shall go and carry grain for the famine of your households, ²⁰and bring your youngest brother to me. Thus your words will be verified, and you shall not die.’ And they agreed to do so. ²¹They said to one another, ‘Alas, we are paying the penalty for what we did to our brother; we saw his anguish when he pleaded with us, but we would not listen. That is why this anguish has come upon us.’²² Then Reuben answered them, ‘Did I not tell you not to wrong the boy? But you would not listen. So now there comes a reckoning for his blood.’²³ They did not know that Joseph understood them, since he spoke with them through an interpreter. ²⁴He turned away from them and wept; then he returned and spoke to them. And he picked out Simeon and had him bound before their eyes. ²⁵Joseph then gave orders to fill their bags with grain, to return every man’s money to his sack, and to give them provisions for their journey. This was done for them.

26 They loaded their donkeys with their grain, and departed. ²⁷When one of them opened his sack to give his donkey fodder at the lodging-place, he saw his money at the top of the sack. ²⁸He said to his brothers, ‘My money has been put back; here it is in my sack!’ At this they lost heart and turned trembling to one another, saying, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’

29 When they came to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan, they told him all that had happened to them, saying, ³⁰‘The man, the lord of the land, spoke harshly to us, and charged us with spying on the land. ³¹But we said to him, “We are honest men, we are not spies. ³²We are twelve brothers, sons of our father; one is no more, and the youngest is now with our father in the land of Canaan.” ³³Then the man, the lord of the land, said to us, “By this I shall know that you are honest men: leave one of your brothers with me, take grain for the famine of your households, and go your way. ³⁴Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men. Then I will release your brother to you, and you may trade in the land.”’

35 As they were emptying their sacks, there in each one’s sack was his bag of money. When they and their father saw their bundles of money, they were dismayed. ³⁶And their father Jacob said to them, ‘I am the one you have bereaved of children: Joseph is no more, and Simeon is no more, and now you would take Benjamin. All this has

happened to me!’³⁷Then Reuben said to his father, ‘You may kill my two sons if I do not bring him back to you. Put him in my hands, and I will bring him back to you.’³⁸But he said, ‘My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should come to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my grey hairs with sorrow to Sheol.’

Now the famine was severe in the land.²And when they had eaten up the grain that they had brought from Egypt, their father said to them, ‘Go again, buy us a little more food.’³But Judah said to him, ‘The man solemnly warned us, saying, “You shall not see my face unless your brother is with you.”’⁴If you will send our brother with us, we will go down and buy you food; ⁵but if you will not send him, we will not go down, for the man said to us, “You shall not see my face, unless your brother is with you.”’ [...] ⁸Then Judah said to his father Israel, ‘Send the boy with me, and let us be on our way, so that we may live and not die—you and we and also our little ones.’⁹I myself will be surety for him; you can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back to you and set him before you, then let me bear the blame forever.¹⁰If we had not delayed, we would now have returned twice.’

¹¹ Then their father Israel said to them, ‘If it must be so, then do this: take some of the choice fruits of the land in your bags, and carry them down as a present to the man—a little balm and a little honey, gum, resin, pistachio nuts, and almonds.’¹²Take double the money with you. Carry back with you the money that was returned in the top of your sacks; perhaps it was an oversight.¹³Take your brother also, and be on your way again to the man; ¹⁴may God Almighty grant you mercy before the man, so that he may send back your other brother and Benjamin. As for me, if I am bereaved of my children, I am bereaved.’¹⁵So the men took the present, and they took double the money with them, as well as Benjamin. Then they went on their way down to Egypt, and stood before Joseph.

¹⁶ When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he said to the steward of his house, ‘Bring the men into the house, and slaughter an animal and make ready, for the men are to dine with me at noon.’¹⁷The man did as Joseph said, and brought the men to Joseph’s house.¹⁸Now the men were afraid because they were brought to Joseph’s house, and they said, ‘It is because of the money, replaced in our sacks the first time, that we have been brought in, so that he may have an opportunity to fall upon us, to make slaves of us and take our donkeys.’¹⁹So they went up to the steward of Joseph’s house and spoke with him at the entrance to the house.²⁰They said, ‘Oh, my lord, we came down the first time to buy food; ²¹and when we came to the lodging-place we opened our sacks, and there was each one’s money in the top of his sack, our money in full weight. So we have brought it back with us.’²²Moreover, we have brought down with us additional money to buy food. We do not know who put our money in our sacks.’²³He replied, ‘Rest assured, do not be afraid; your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your sacks for you; I received your money.’ Then he brought Simeon out to them.²⁴When the steward had brought the men into Joseph’s house, and given them water, and they had washed their feet, and

when he had given their donkeys fodder, ²⁵they made the present ready for Joseph's coming at noon, for they had heard that they would dine there.

²⁶ When Joseph came home, they brought him the present that they had carried into the house, and bowed to the ground before him. ²⁷He inquired about their welfare, and said, 'Is your father well, the old man of whom you spoke? Is he still alive?' ²⁸They said, 'Your servant our father is well; he is still alive.' And they bowed their heads and did obeisance. ²⁹Then he looked up and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, 'Is this your youngest brother, of whom you spoke to me? God be gracious to you, my son!' ³⁰With that, Joseph hurried out, because he was overcome with affection for his brother, and he was about to weep. So he went into a private room and wept there. ³¹Then he washed his face and came out; and controlling himself he said, 'Serve the meal.[...]' ³³When they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, the men looked at one another in amazement. ³⁴Portions were taken to them from Joseph's table, but Benjamin's portion was five times as much as any of theirs. So they drank and were merry with him.

SERMON

This week, the chickens have come home to roost for those brothers of Joseph. The seven year famine has struck more than just Egypt, and at their home in Canaan, the eleven sons of Jacob, along with all of their wives, children, and livestock, they're starving. There is no food to be found anywhere except in the storehouses of Egypt. And so, the brothers set off, leaving the youngest, Benjamin, with their father. Jacob refuses to let his youngest, the last remaining son of his favorite wife, Rachel, out of his sight, lest he be lost like his brother Joseph.

Anyway, the brothers march off and arrive in Egypt. And when they stand before Joseph, asking for food, not a one of the ten brothers recognizes him as their brother, the young boy they sold into slavery years prior. And Joseph, capitalizing on the element of surprise here, he decides to test them. He claims they're spies, takes Simeon hostage, and refuses to release him until the brothers return with Benjamin, the youngest and only full brother of Joseph. Joseph gives

them grain enough to feed their families and sends them on their way, with their money hidden on top of their bags.

Now, the brothers are terrified. They know taking Benjamin will break the heart of their father, and the returned bags of money confuse them. The brothers return to their father and press to leave immediately with Benjamin, in order to rescue Simeon and get more grain. However, Jacob refuses. He has lost Joseph, he has now lost Simeon, and he does not trust the brothers to bring Benjamin back, alive. It's easier for him to mourn two sons, rather than risk a third. But, time passes, the grain gets eaten, and swayed by the prospect of losing his entire family to starvation, Jacob finally relents. He allows the brothers to return, taking Benjamin with them. The brothers set out, with bags of money to pay back what they hope was simply an oversight on the part of the Egyptians, more money to buy more grain, and gifts from their land to present to the man, the overseer, whom they still don't realize is their brother.

Upon returning to Egypt, things work out better than they could have hoped! Their risk pays off: the money is returned to them, the gifts are accepted, Simeon is released, Benjamin is safe, and they are invited to dine at the table of the great overseer. Things seem to be moving in their direction.

Again, this story is wonderful so far as it goes, right? It's full of drama, twist and turns, some great little details. I especially love the fact that Joseph is speaking in Egyptian, and the brothers don't know he can understand their Hebrew speech. That's such a classic movie gag, right? Speaking one language, but secretly understanding others. I love it. But, as the protagonist and namesake of our tale, I

find Joseph to be the most interesting character here. After having been sold into slavery by his brothers, left to die in Egypt, separated from his family, and thrown into jail for years for a crime he didn't commit: it's easy to assume that he's putting his brothers through all of this out of malice. He speaks harshly to them, he takes one prisoner, he throws all of them in jail for several days. Even upon sending them back, he sends the money bags without explanation, which makes the brothers incredibly nervous that they're going to be accused of stealing, leading to prison or worse. Joseph hides his own emotions, even speaking in another language, so the brothers have no chance to see him as one of their own. At first blush, it's easy to think that Joseph might be acting out of anger and hatred. Mistreating his brothers, setting them up to get a taste of their own medicine. Or, at least that's how I've read this story for years and years. I've always assumed that this is all about payback and retribution.

But this time, I was struck by the fact that Joseph is never painted as angry in this passage. He's described as overcome with emotion, and we have this picture of him going into a different room to compose himself from crying, but I think I was wrong to assume that he's acting out of anger. Instead, I wonder if Joseph is setting up his brothers for a test of loyalty...it seems to me that maybe he's trying to see if they've learned their lesson, if they've had a change of heart, if they've become better brothers since selling him off into slavery so many years ago.

And he doesn't give them any easy choices here: Simeon is left in prison back in Egypt, and I'm certain Joseph would know that releasing Benjamin would be nearly impossible for his father, Jacob.

Plus, those bags of money complicate everything: the brothers look like thieves, but it's also nice to have the money. Maybe the brothers would stay in Canaan, keep the money for themselves, leave Simeon to rot in prison. After all, it's certainly a lot more money than they got selling Joseph into slavery so many years ago. Maybe they would return and not mention the money, hoping it was forgotten. Or, as we know happens, maybe they would take the real risk of returning, with Benjamin and the money, paying their debt in more ways than one.

It takes more time than expected, and the pressure of famine, for Jacob to finally relent and release his son Benjamin, but the brothers do indeed return as honorably as possible, money to return, brother in tow, gifts to offer. And I think in this, Joseph learns something important about them: they've had a change of heart. These are now brothers who understand what it means to be a family, to care for one another. They don't leave Simeon behind for a few extra bags of gold, they promise their own lives in return for the safety of their youngest brother, and they risk returning to Egypt in order to get food for their various families. They've grown up, they're caring for the people God has given them.

And this is one of the great lessons we can cull from the story of Joseph and his brothers. People can change. It is possible for people to learn from their previous mistakes and change course. Here we see brothers who once sold their own sibling into slavery out of their own jealousy and anger become men who take great risks to save one of their own, to get food for their families, to become honorable men. In a sense, they've learned what it means to be their brother's keeper.

I don't think this is all about internal grit and drive, although it would be wrong to say the brothers didn't participate in their own growth. But throughout this story, the unspoken character lurking just behind the scenes of every dream and every action is God. Over and over again we see the hand of God sneaking in around the edges, clearing a new path for Joseph, giving him insight into the dreams of others, continuing to bless his work no matter where he finds himself, in prison, in a house, in the court of Pharaoh. In the Joseph story, it's obvious that God plays a significant role, and in this particular part of the story, I don't think it's overstating anything to say that God has acted to change the hearts of these brothers.

It reminds me, in some sense, of various 12-step programs. Whether for alcohol or narcotics or any other addiction, the classic 12-step program relies on both the individual themselves to make changes, make amends, change the way they live and the interact with the world, but they also provide the constant reminder that you cannot make such a significant change and sustain it without first calling on some form of higher power, something outside yourself which motivates the change. God or nature or whatever. I think these brothers have gone through their own recovery program, repenting of the anger, jealousy, mean spiritedness, and hatred of their youth and turning toward a true care for each other. Part of that comes from themselves, but I think the writer of this story would agree: this change would not have been possible without the significant involvement of a compassionate and merciful God inviting these brothers into something more.

Now, next week we'll do our best to wrap up the story of Joseph, and there are more twists along the way. But perhaps for this week, as we sit with the story of these brothers who had an honest change of heart, perhaps we're being invited to think about those in our own lives, or even ourselves, at moments when they have or we've experienced a significant change of heart. Perhaps this story of Joseph will give us the example we need to sort of "trust but verify" and move toward forgiveness in our own lives. It's not an easy, quick, simple thing to do. Sometimes it'll take twice as long to get back to Egypt than we expect, but I think it's important to remember, that we serve a God who makes honest changes of heart not only possible, but the core of our experience and story of being a people who believe in resurrection and redemption. Thanks be to God.