

When we think about the story of Joseph the patriarch, the son of Jacob from the Old Testament, we're often tempted to focus only on his ability to interpret dreams. His own dreams. Other people's dreams. Strange dreams about sheaves of wheat bowing down and grape vines shooting out into a person's hand and cows eating each other.

They're very odd dreams. But they end up being dreams about the future. And Joseph correctly interprets them all. It was a great gift that God had given him. And it ends up changing the entire course of his life. First for bad and then for good.

But that wasn't the only gift that God gave to Joseph. When Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the grain collection and gives him remarkable power over the nation, he does so not just because Joseph correctly interpreted a dream. He says that the Spirit of God is with Joseph and that God has given Joseph incredible wisdom. Wisdom not just to make sense of dreams, but to make sense of life.

We find Joseph making sense of life in our Old Testament Lesson today. And as Pharaoh had said, he does so with great spiritual understanding and great wisdom. He does so in a way that we can all learn from.

Probably the most prominent and surprising way that Joseph makes sense of life is in his understanding of suffering. Because Joseph has no problem seeing God's hand at work in his life, even though his life has been one disaster after another.

First he gets attacked and sold into slavery by his jealous brothers. Then he gets falsely accused of trying to rape his master Potiphar's wife and thrown in prison. Then he, just when he thinks he's made friends with Pharaoh's cupbearer who will help get him out of prison, this supposed friend just plain forgets about him and lets him rot in prison for years, until he finally makes good on his promise to help Joseph out.

And yet, Joseph never despairs. He never gives up on the Lord. He always holds onto his faith. And he always holds onto the firm conviction that God has a reason for all this. He has a plan.

So when Joseph finally finds himself released from prison, given a high position in Pharaoh's cabinet, and is presented the opportunity to help his father and brothers, Joseph doesn't hesitate to give God the credit. *“God sent me before you... it was not you who sent me here but God... He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord over all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.”*

God did this. Not you. Not Potiphar's wife. Not Pharaoh's cupbearer. God made me suffer, so that he could put in the right place at the right time. And carry out his divine plan for his beloved people.

That is a crazy amount of faith that Joseph has on display. But that's what true wisdom needs: faith. And that's not at all how the world looks at wisdom. Worldly wisdom only looks at the facts. It only looks at what is right in front of you. What is concrete and measurable and rational.

And so, worldly wisdom is always short sighted. That's what we talked about last week in Jeremiah. Worldly wisdom springs up in the good times and then immediately dies in the bad times. Because it can't see past the end of its own nose. It can't see past the physical world into a spiritual world. Where there is a God ordering all things for our good.

And so worldly wisdom becomes a curse. A curse of shortsightedness. A curse of rationalism and materialism. A curse that leads to death.

Joseph's brothers were consumed by worldly wisdom. They thought eliminating him would solve all their problems. Had they succeeded, they all would have died during the famine. The same is true of Pharaoh himself. Had he not recognized that the Spirit of God was on Joseph, that he was a man of true wisdom, he would have blindly moved ahead with his normal policies and ended up destroyed by the same famine that nearly killed Joseph's family.

Worldly, shortsighted wisdom would have killed them all. But Godly wisdom doesn't rely merely on what we can see and hear, taste, touch, and smell. Godly wisdom doesn't rely merely on what we can understand. Godly wisdom has faith. Faith that there is a God with a plan. A plan for our good. A plan for our salvation. A plan for our resurrection.

Which is another key aspect of Joseph's wisdom that can go unappreciated. Joseph understands that God has a plan. And he understands his part in that plan.

He tells his brothers: *"God sent me before you to preserve life."* Again, a little later, he says, *"God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."* Again, he tells them how he will give them a home in the land of Goshen, *"so that you and your household, and all that you have, do not come to poverty."*

Joseph understands not only that God has caused him to suffer, not only that God has brought him through this suffering, not only that God has given him this position of power in Egypt, but most of all, he understands that God intends for him to use that power for the good of others.

God does not bless us so that we can hoard our wealth. He does not bless us so that we can be selfish and power hungry. He does not bless us so that we can abuse that power and make others suffer like we did.

No, Jesus spells it out for us in our Gospel lesson: *"As you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."* God gives you blessings so that you can bless others. Period. Full stop. It is not merely for your good. It is for someone else. If you would hope and pray that somebody else would share their blessing with you in your time of need, then that is exactly how you should treat others. That is exactly how Joseph did treat others.

Again, worldly wisdom can't conceive of that kind of generosity. The kind of generosity that would help even your enemies and do good to those who hate you and lend to those who can't pay back and have mercy on those who don't deserve mercy.

Yet, that's the exact generosity that Jesus has for us. Turning his cheek to those who struck him. Blessing those who cursed him on the cross. Forgiving those who judged him worthy of death. Worldly wisdom says Jesus was a fool. Godly wisdom says this is how all God's children should live. Joseph certainly did so with his brothers. They did nothing to earn his forgiveness, to deserve his help. But he helped them anyway.

And yet, that reveals one further piece of wisdom from Joseph for us. In the Lord's Prayer, Jesus tells us to forgive as we are forgiven. And he reinforces that with a couple of parables. The unforgiving servant, for example, who has his huge debt forgiven by his master, but then refuses to forgive a much smaller debt owed to him by a fellow servant, and is condemned by his master for doing so. If you need motivation to forgive others, if you need to learn how to forgive others, just look at how you are forgiven. And that's all very true.

And yet, that's not the only reason. That's certainly not the reason for Joseph. He doesn't forgive his brothers because he's been forgiven. Frankly, Joseph is one of the most righteous men in the entire Bible. We don't hear about him committing any sins to forgive – although I'm sure there were.

No, Joseph consistently goes back to one reason and one reason only for forgiving his brothers: his father. He wants to see his father again. He wants his father to be safe and well cared for. He wants to abide by his father's wishes that Joseph forgive his brothers and live in peace with them.

Joseph is the embodiment of the fourth commandment. He wants to honor his father above all things. And that desire to be a good son to his father – to do his father's will – leads him to forgive when worldly wisdom would say he should get revenge.

Jesus had that same desire to honor his father. He tells his disciples over and over again that he is here to do the work of his father. He prays in the Garden of the Gethsemane, *"Father, not my will, but thine be done."* And he prays for the very people crucifying him, *"Father forgive them, for they know not what they do."*

God the Father desires that sinners be forgiven. And so Jacob forgave his sons. Joseph forgave his brothers. Jesus forgave us. Just as he calls us to forgive each other in our Gospel lesson, *“Love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful.”*

Forgive as you are forgiven. Be merciful as your Father is merciful to you. Honor your Father by treating your neighbors, your brothers and sisters in Christ, as he has treated them. With compassion. With grace. With wisdom.

Godly wisdom. That sees past the curse of sin to the glory of the resurrection. When we will stand side by side as sons of the Most High with a great reward that will not pass away. Amen.