

“Losing It to Live in Faith”

Genesis 45:1-15

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "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. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, 'Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me, do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children's children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.' And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here." Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

Matthew 15:21-28

Jesus left that place and went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.

The reformed churches have always emphasized that we live by faith. Faith is so important to us that we claim our justification before God by faith through the grace of Jesus Christ alone. There is nothing else, nada, zilch, left for us to do regarding our salvation. One of the most helpful definitions of faith I know is John Calvin's. The first part goes like this, "Faith is the firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence towards us." Faith is our belief that God always has been and always will be kind, good, and generous towards us. Faith involves trust in what God has done, what God is doing, and what God has promised to do in the future. Faith leads us to believe that God loves us and all of creation. Our shared faith empowered your call to me as your ordained staff minister. In faith you elected and empowered your Pastoral Nominating Committee, trusting them when they extended a call to me. I believe they shared with me the truth

about the life of Central Presbyterian Church. Well, time will tell! Our continued trust in God will provide grace as we learn about one another and discern our common calling as the body of Christ.

It is one thing to have faith in God, and another thing altogether to live out this belief, through our actions. Each day we are faced with decisions about our vocations and our home life, our relationships, and how we decided to treat our own minds and bodies. We make these decisions with the healed and wounded parts of our past, our present joys and struggles, and future expectations all floating about in our brains at once. To the center our self-understandings enters our faith in God forming the center around which we draw strength for how we will live.

It may seem someone of no faith that possessing faith should simplify our decision-making. But it hardly ever works out this way as faith requires us to do a great deal of individual interpretive work and communal reflection.

Faith leads some to make decisions that leave most other people scratching their heads. People of faith often take the road less traveled. They have this weird bent toward following God no matter what others think about how they live their lives. We could say some of us “lose it” altogether, living lives far away from society’s norms. All because of faith. You know the type. Mostly modern prophets, hermits or cloistered folks. Radicals. People set apart calling us mainstreamers out like John in the desert-wilderness.

Then there are the rest of us. Don’t get me wrong. Prophets are no better than the rest of us, in fact, being on the edge may sometimes be easier than living in the midst of the mainstream. What about our decision-making? How are we to live our lives grounded in the midst of this particular society, while also holding to our belief in God and our call to live out our faith? We are called to live transformed lives down on Main Street, at the factory, in the school system, during the Gardening Club Meeting, at a family reunion with our most annoying in-law! Well, I am a pastor, so of course I am going to say that the Bible gives us clues on how we are to live. But today’s clues are through stories and we must do the interpretive work to understand their meaning for our lives of faith.

In our Genesis reading we joined Joseph’s story of faith, right where the rubber hit the road in his life of faith. His brothers, who had sold him into slavery in Egypt years before, had now come to him twice as counselor of Pharaoh. Joseph was in charge of all of the food he had stockpiled in anticipation of a seven-year drought and the ensuing famine. We know from Joseph’s background in Genesis that his faith often influenced his vocation and the decisions he made. Although he was a man of power in Egypt, he achieved this position by being true to the God of his ancestors. No amount of power ever took away the fact he still had to eat alone because it was a disgrace for an Egyptian to eat with a Hebrew. As an outsider rising up from the bottom, he knew about the pressure to conform, but he refused to toss his faith aside. His faith in God had kept him through his tough times and now it has become the lens through which he viewed the world.

Now standing before him were his half brothers who sold him into slavery and his full blood brother Benjamin who he had requested. Joseph lost it! If he had done what his society thought he should do with his brothers, it would have been to take revenge on his half brothers. Instead he sends the Egyptians out of the room because what he is

about to do will make no sense to them if they know the full story. He put his position and status aside and wept so loud that the Egyptians and Pharaoh heard him. Joseph confessed what he believed God had done with his brothers' actions and said, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...to preserve for you a remnant on earth...it was not you who sent me here, but God." Then he and Benjamin wept on each other and he kissed all the rest of his brothers and wept and they talked.

Imagine the scene. Joseph was a very pragmatic man, faithful to God, yet acculturated to his position in society. He *loses it* bearing witness to his faith not his common sense. He lost the anger that could have held him back from seeing God at work redeeming his toughest, loneliest times. Through faith he has learned to value reconciliation and life, even the lives of those who have harmed him. Terence Fretheim a biblical scholar says that for Joseph, "What God has done stands independent of the brothers' repentance...(the) brother's objectives were thwarted and brought into the larger orbit of God's purposes and used by God to bring life instead of death."ⁱ This Joseph BELIEVES! Nothing excused his brothers' criminal behavior towards him. But Joseph believed God was with him always, in that pit they threw him into and during his years of slavery. Joseph's faith led him to lose all concern about his status and let go of his anger. Eventually he was reunited with his father Jacob and God's promise to Jacob of life through his ancestors, was possible again.

Our reading from Matthew tells of a very different story two of people who lose it to live in faith. Each in their own way the Canaanite woman and Jesus let go of what might have held them apart forever if they followed their society's standards instead of faith. This story is not a typical miracle story. A dialogue, which is painful to us regarding Jesus, becomes just as important to our faith as the miracle that followed.

The person crying out to Jesus to heal a loved one is considered an outsider to the disciples and to Jesus. Matthew tells us this through these two words "Canaanite woman." There were no Canaanites alive in Jesus' day. They had all been assimilated into other cultures in the area. The Canaanites were ancient enemies of Israel. Matthew tells us this person is out of Jesus' realm of concern, and this persistent person is a woman too. She's stepped out of her place. Her faith has led her to believe that Jesus is the one who can heal her daughter. The Canaanite woman professes belief through the language of Christian worship. She knows Jesus as Lord and Son of David and calls for mercy. Even at the third go around she continues to profess Jesus as Lord, believing God was there with her and that in Jesus there were crumbs enough for outsiders.

The woman's faith is evident before Jesus who seems to be struggling with his call, pondering its limits. One of my seminary professors, Patrick Miller, said about this text, "Here a cry for help arises out of a dogged trust that persists even when Jesus himself appears to cut the ground out from under it. From just such an example the church learns something about what real faith in Jesus is—which is exactly the point of Jesus' final words."ⁱⁱ Those words are, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." Jesus ends up losing it too! What held him back from helping her originally is no longer of any consequence. Her story is considered a foreshadowing by Matthew of Jesus' mission extending to the entire world. We do well when reading this text to remember that Jesus often tells his disciples "do not fear" and also, "ask, seek,

knock” encouraging them to wrestle with their faith, to live out their beliefs and possibly even challenge God.

What is the “it” we need to lose as a community to live our life of faith together? What is “it” for you as an individual? Is “it” right now your status, or reputation or does “it” have to do with a client, a family member, a friend, or even God?

Joseph lived in the mainstream, conscious of his actions and of his place in Pharaoh’s court. We have every reason to believe that the Canaanite woman returned to her hometown and normal life too. But they both stepped out on a limb when called upon by their faith. I want to share some modern day examples to encourage our own endeavors to lose it and live in faith. We need encouragement to break the bonds that hold us back from living in Christ, taking the stands we need to take in our every day lives.

During a recent trip I took with newly graduated high school seniors at Second church the youth led the Devotionals on an overnight ferry. One youth challenged the others to think about a time when they let go of peer pressure and stopped worrying about what others would think to follow their faith. Each story in the group of young men I was with had to do with them reaching out to a peer despite what others around them might think. One stood up for what was right to his football team in regards to a young man who was being taunted. One befriended a new kid that tried to use his money to impress everyone but turned everyone off. The last one talked about losing it to live in faith on our current trip. He had made some mistakes, broken our group covenant and admitted it before the whole group. He shared that he had gone around to every youth on the trip and apologized for his lack of judgment and for putting them through what he had. He said he could have never have admitted he was wrong to so many people before, but his faith freed him to put his pride aside and seek reconciliation with all his peers. He lost it and LIVED life more fully. His actions were a beautiful testimonial to his peer and to the adults on the trip. He had a confidence in himself I had never seen before.

Losing “it,” whatever “it” is for us, is risky business. Let us pray we are up to the challenges before us as individuals and as a community of believers united around our common faith in Jesus Christ. Amen.

ⁱ *The Book of Genesis: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections.* The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. 1. Terence E. Fretheim. Abingdon Press: Nashville, 1994. Pp. 645-46.

ⁱⁱ *Pentecost 2.* Proclamation 3: Aids for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year, Series A. Patrick D. Miller. Fortress Press: Philadelphia, 1987. Pp. 28.