

# *God's Plans, Not Ours*

Rev. Dr. Scott Ramsey

Psalm 133; Genesis 45:1-15  
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*Unity* is a gift, it is a reality that we can experience, and it is a goal towards which we work.

'How very good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity,' we hear in the opening words of Psalm 133. 'There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all,' we hear in Ephesians 4. "May they be one," Jesus prays to God for his followers, "just as you and I are one." Unity, union, communion, community, these are among the deepest goals in all creation. We were not created to be alone, we were created to get there together.

But we may imagine that the reason the psalmist would say, "How very good and pleasant it is when kindred dwell together in unity," is because the psalmist must have experienced *how rare* unity is. How rare it can be for families to dwell together in unity, for neighbors to dwell in unity, for a faith community to dwell in unity, for the world – in which there is so much distrust, so much war and violence, so much polarization and division – to dwell in unity. You only need to say, "Do not be afraid," when the person you're talking to is scared. Likewise, you only need to say, "It would be great if we could come together," if at the moment, you are very far apart and divided.

It is important for us to remember here that 'unity' is very different from 'uniformity.' 'Uniformity' is where everyone thinks the same, where everyone looks and acts the same, where everyone is alike. *Unity* can exist in the midst of enormous diversity – diversity of experience, diversity of belief, diversity of background. Uniformity is never the goal in biblical faith. Unity, in the midst of our wondrous diversity, is the goal. Christ has broken down the dividing wall, the hostility between us (Eph. 2:14).

Psalm 133's anthem of unity may seem like an odd fit for the story of Joseph and his brothers. After all, this family has been marked by manipulation and betrayal going back multiple generations, which would not seem to be particularly promising ground for unity. The same way you might look at our society these days – with the massive polarization and division that are all around us – and think that we are not particularly promising ground for unity. But then we recall that the God of Easter is in the business of making a way out of no way, and turning dead ends into new beginnings.

In our text from Genesis 45, Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt because there is a massive region-wide famine. This family's dynamics are playing out in the midst of a geopolitical food crisis, a crisis that is both managed, and exploited, by the Egyptian imperial regime. We learn in Genesis 47 that the reason the Hebrew people became slaves in Egypt is directly related to the empire's exploitation of the food crisis – exploitation that is engineered by our Joseph. But that's getting a little ahead of the story.

In chapter 45, what we see is that Joseph's brothers have come to Egypt to buy food for their family back in the land of Canaan. What the brothers do not yet realize is that the manager with whom they must deal, in order to purchase grain, is their younger brother Joseph, whom they sold into slavery all those years ago. 22 years have passed between their act of treachery against their 17-year-old brother Joseph, who was loved by their father more than they and who told them, with perhaps more than a little braggadocio, his dreams of superiority over them. 22 years have passed. 22 years of hurt, guilt, division, betrayal, and resentment. All in the midst of a massive regional crisis, that is causing great suffering.

Not exactly promising ground for unity and blessing.

But when the brothers and Joseph are together in Genesis 45, there is a breakthrough. "Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, 'Send everyone away from me'... he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am Joseph'."

With those words, the brothers realize that the one who was lost has been found, the one who was presumed dead-and-gone is alive. But of course, this mini-experience of Easter is not an uncomplicated Easter for the brothers, because they are the ones who stripped him of his robe, put him in the pit, and sold him off into slavery. At the moment that Joseph announces himself, they would have had reason to look around for an exit. They thought they had disposed of this younger brother, only now to find themselves in his powerful presence. They would have had reason to expect some kind of vengeful retaliation from Joseph. *They are having an uncomfortable conversation.*

Through this summer, a small group of us from Lewinsville has been participating in a series of conversations and discussions over Zoom with some neighbors from other faith communities, sponsored by the group, Clergy United for Racial Empathy, or CURE. This series found a new urgency after the killing of George Floyd earlier this summer, and we have been exploring together issues of racial injustice, white supremacy, and racism. A focus of the discussions, especially for those of us who are white, has been to *examine ourselves* to see how racism lives and operates inside of us. The problem, after all, is not just out there, somewhere. The

problem is in here. We have a lot of work to do on our own assumptions, beliefs, and behavior.

Realizing how deep the beliefs about white supremacy have gotten into us, and how far we have to go ourselves in the work of racial equality and racial equity and racial justice, is not a comfortable thing. It is unsettling, and it can make your face flush with embarrassment when you realize some of the assumptions you have been carrying around for a long time. For many of us, we've been carrying around these problematic assumptions about race, often beneath our conscious awareness, for a lot longer than 22 years.

But here we were, white people, black people, Jews and Christians of various denominations, gathered together, via Zoom, trying to learn how to talk together about these things, so that we can move forward together. Though the conversations were filled with energy and with hope, they were also not entirely comfortable. And I'm imagining that, if they were not entirely comfortable for those of us who were white, they were also, for different reasons, not entirely comfortable for those who were black.

In the course of a recent conversation, we were talking about the messages we were taking away from the discussions. And one of the African-American participants said, "We've got to press on. We've got to press on with the uncomfortable conversations." If we are to reach anything like the healing unity that Psalm 133 speaks of, the path to that unity goes through conversations that will, at first, unsettle us.

Much of the time, it is in uncomfortable conversations that God's path and plan are revealed to us. "It was not you who sent me here," Joseph tells them, "but God." The brothers and Joseph had a difficult past. This conversation was not a comfortable one. Joseph erupts into tears and wailing. His brothers stand there, not sure of what will happen next. They are in the midst of what may genuinely be called a "crucial conversation."<sup>1</sup>

In this moment, in this uncomfortable conversation, what Joseph sees is that God has taken the fearful, resentful, cruel actions of the brothers, and has used them, redeemed them, for a life-giving future. "God sent me before you to preserve life." The story in no way celebrates the cruel behavior of the brothers, but bears witness to the ways that God's grace is at work in the awful things that happen. The brothers thought they had been getting rid of their irritating, spoiled younger brother. But God had a different path and a different plan.

God has a path and a plan for our world, and for us. That path will lead each of us through uncomfortable conversations, conversations that we might prefer to avoid. But, by the grace of God, that path leads to dwelling together in unity. What

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<sup>1</sup> Patterson, Kerry. *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2012.

uncomfortable conversations might you need to be a part of in the days ahead? To God and to God alone be all the glory, now and forever. Amen.