

“Yes, Stuff Happened in our Past, And...a Fresh Start is Possible”

First Sermon in the Five-week Series: “Yes, And...Storytelling + Listening”

Yes, your story is important...and you can learn from everyone’s story.

Genesis 44 and 45, selected verses (The Voice)

This week, Rev. Eugene Downing of New Hope Baptist Church and I attended the New Baptist Covenant¹ gathering in Atlanta, Georgia with other Baptist clergy who are committed to bridging the divides of centuries-old systemic racism in our cities by bringing African-American and Euro-American people together, particularly in our churches. This is long, hard, painful work and sometimes the only thing we have to hold us together is our stories.

Yes, your story is important, and you can learn from everyone’s story. Seems simple enough, but so often we assume *our* story is the full story...and it so rarely is. So I want to share with you a powerful story I heard this week.

The similarities of First Baptist Church of Macon, Georgia and First Baptist Church of Christ

of Macon, Georgia are striking: the elegant planked wood ceilings, the majestic pipe organs, the grand chancels. Original 19th-century wooden pews have a patina that only comes from generations of people sitting through countless sermons.²

But these two churches don’t just share an architect and a name, they also share a history that is not uncommon in the South, yet is little discussed. Before the Civil War, they were one congregation under one roof, though segregated by race in the pews. They later split into separate, segregated institutions altogether: First Baptist became the predominantly black church. First Baptist Church of Christ became the predominantly white one. Today, they are separated by one large lawn...the area of about a block, I understand.

¹ <http://newbaptistcovenant.org/our-calling-new/>

² Rosalind Bentley, “Two churches began in slavery; today they are reckoning with that past,” *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (Dec. 22, 2017), accessed on Oct.

21, 2018 at <https://www.myajc.com/news/local/two-churches-began-slavery-today-they-are-reckoning-with-that-past/myC4MrvHYSCazPUQALYmtK/>.

African-Americans say white worshippers forced the split. Whites say black worshippers chose to separate. Slave owners were simply honoring the enslaved's desire for autonomy, or so went the story for generations in at the white church – First Baptist Church of Christ. *“It wasn't just that we had different versions of history, but that neither was complete [without the other],”* said Scott Dickison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Christ and James Goolsby, pastor of First Baptist Church.

These dueling narratives continued until just a few years ago when the churches sat down together to discuss their history...and this is what they learned!

In 1826, Macon's wealthiest planters, bankers and businessmen chartered First Baptist Church of Christ. Each man owned between eight to 20 enslaved people.

When the original building was constructed, almost certainly by enslaved men, a section was designated for them. This

arrangement was not uncommon in the South, particularly after the Nat Turner slave rebellion in 1831³ when laws were enacted barring black people from assembling without white supervision.

By the early 1840s, black people outnumbered whites 2-1 at First Baptist. So, you can probably guess what happened.

In 1845, a new building was constructed for the black church-goers, but with certain provisions. Because the new First Baptist members were not allowed to have a black pastor (due to “white supervision”), the white pastor from their formerly combined church preached and gave the sacraments...the service times were staggered to make this possible.

“Our story at First Baptist Church of Christ was that we built the black church for them and that we were good people who did good things, but that's not an accurate depiction,” historian and church member Doug Thompson said.

³ Turner was an enslaved preacher who interpreted the scriptures to mean deliverance was not something that came after death. Rather, it should be seized in life. He

and his followers killed more than 60 white people in an insurrection that terrorized Virginia for two days.

Looking through archives and church membership rolls, Thompson found records that told ugly truths about the early days of the church.

Around 1855, the widow of one of the early First Baptist Church of Christ members needed to raise some extra money. Ledgers contain entries for the sale of two teen-aged boys. One was sold for \$950, about \$46,000 in today's money, and a few days later the other boy was sold for the same sum.

“Then, that week, she paid the preacher,” Thompson said. He believes, based on the ledger entries, that at least some money from the sale of the teenagers was used to pay the clergy. Dickison, the pastor of the current white church added: *“It begs the question that’s difficult to get your head around: ‘Were the two enslaved boys church members at one time?’ Did we sell members of the church?” [to literally pay the preacher??]*

When Dickison preached about the findings in a subsequent sermon at their church, *“there was an audible gasp in the*

[primarily white] congregation... Afterward, people said, ‘We don’t tell this story.’ We have to do something about this.’”

Now, nearly 200 years since the formation of the original church, the people of both congregations are confronting the long legacy of slavery and segregation and how it has shaped their houses of worship. There’s a lot of mistrust and skepticism but they are holding that tension and not running from it.⁴

The two churches are forging a partnership that includes, first and foremost, relationship building – telling their stories and listening to one another. It is a moment of revealing the truth about who they are, and recognizing they have a shared history, no matter how horrific, and instead of perpetuating that history, they want to work towards healing and moving forward together. It is long and hard work. It doesn’t happen with one meal, one conversation. But they know that it all begins with *how* they tell their story. They are hopeful for a fresh start. Not a fresh start that forgets their

⁴ Notes about this story come from both the referenced newspaper article and from my notes as the two pastors

told this story at the New Baptist Covenant conference in Atlanta, GA in October 2018.

history, but one that preserves it...*all the voices* of it.

How we tell our story matters. What details we include and what details we omit. Whose voices we lift up and whose voices we silence. Does the way we tell our story keep us stuck in our past? Or does it honestly honor our past while also allowing us to move forward? *Yes, stuff happens in our past, and a fresh start is possible.*

Joseph's story is remembered and passed down in the book of Genesis. Short of having a whole book named after him – like Ruth or Jonah or Job – Joseph does pretty well. He gets 14 chapters...Genesis 37-50. Today we meet him in chapters 44-45 at what would be called, in literary terms, the denouement, or, "*the climax of this long chain of events, when something is decided or made clear.*" All of the tension in this story has been building to this moment, and what happens in this moment will dictate how the future unfolds.

And if you know your Bible then you know *this* moment well – the moment of revealing and recognition...when Joseph stops hiding and reveals

himself to his brothers and when his brothers come close enough to recognize Joseph – seeing who he really is. Many call this is also a moment of reconciliation...the tears are flowing and there are hugs all around, after all. But just as with the years of hurt in the history of the two First Baptist Churches of Macon, Georgia, reconciliation cannot really happen that quickly. It can take years to re-concile, or restore, broken relationships. So the brothers' embrace is just the beginning of this "fresh start." But before we get there, here's a quick review of all that's happened in the story of Joseph and his brothers up until this point.

Joseph is the youngest of 12 sons. Joseph is a tattle-tale on his brothers, and he brags to them about his dreams (which have them bowing down to him), which they don't especially appreciate. They're also jealous that Joseph is their dad, Jacob's, favorite (remember the coat of many colors?) and so they put Joseph in a pit for him to die, but then brother Judah has an ounce of compassion and instead, they decide to sell Joseph into slavery. We are supposed to feel good about this option, but

many would argue death would have been better than slavery or human trafficking.

After Joseph is sold, his brothers rub animal blood on his pretty coat and they return home and tell their dad he was killed by animals.

Meanwhile, Joseph is taken to Egypt to work for the Pharaoh. Joseph is handsome and successful, rising to the position of overseer over his fellow slaves. Years pass, and Joseph, refusing the advances of Potiphar, Pharaoh's wife, still gets deemed guilty and is thrown in prison. It's there that he begins to impress folks with his dream interpretations...and eventually upon interpreting Pharaoh's dream, he advises Pharaoh to store up 20% of the harvest in seven years of abundance to feed the land in seven years of famine and it's after this good advice that Joseph becomes his second in command to Pharaoh (Genesis 41:41-45).

Back home, facing starvation in Canaan, Jacob sends his sons to Egypt to buy some of the grain that's been stored there. When they arrive, the brothers appear before Joseph (who is now kind of like the Secretary of

Agriculture and has tremendous power about who gets what food). Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not recognize him, probably because it's been years, he's speaking a different language, and let's be honest, I'm sure they never thought in their wildest dreams Joseph would ever be anything but a slave.

Joseph, liking the power he has over his brothers and probably harboring feelings of resentment and revenge, chooses *not* to reveal his identity to his brothers; instead, he accuses them of spying, throws them all in jail for 3 days, and then releases them and demands they return with their youngest brother, Benjamin, and until they he's gonna keep Simeon in prison. To his credit, Joseph does give them some grain and the brothers head back to their dad.

Dad (Jacob) does not want his new youngest son, Benjamin, to go to Egypt because he had already lost two sons – Joseph and Simeon (who was imprisoned back with Joseph). But when the food ran out, and the famine was still severe, Jacob relented and he sent his sons back to Egypt with Benjamin.

This time, Joseph shares a meal with them. He runs off and cries from time to time because he can't take the surge of emotions within him, but he hides that from his brothers. They still don't know who he is.

Then Joseph instructs his servant to slip a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. They take off and then Joseph has his people run after them and call them back and Joseph confronts the brothers about the alleged theft. The brothers beg Joseph to release Benjamin and brother Judah volunteers to stay in his place⁵...to take Ben's punishment for him because it will absolutely kill his father to not have Benjamin return. This is where we picked up with the text today.

It's at this moment that Joseph chooses to reveal himself to his brothers. Seeing that his brothers are still shocked, he invites them to come close to him and he shares his version of his story with them...recounting how they sold him into slavery, etc. but assuring them that this was all

part of God's plan and it's all okay.

Now interestingly, Joseph never forgives his brothers. Instead, he sees their behavior as not of their own doing, "*So it was not you who sent me here, but God.*"⁶ Joseph is interpreting his story in such a way that he removes blame from his brother and, perhaps more importantly, from himself. He puts everything *on God*...as if that explanation makes "almost-murder, slavery, lying, revenge, unlawfully imprisoning, holding hostage, blackmailing, and planting evidence" okay.

Personally, I do not believe that this explanation by Joseph tells us much of anything about how God works in the world – other than that God can work in and through any situation – no matter how twisted and horrific. But really, Joseph's theological explanation here tells us about what's going on inside of Joseph's head and heart. He doesn't want to believe the pain that he felt when his brothers almost killed him and sold him. And – I have no doubt that he doesn't want

⁵ Beth L. Tanner, "Commentary on Genesis 45:1-15," *Working Preacher* (Aug. 20, 2017), accessed on Oct. 21, 2018 at <http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?comm>

[entary_id=3368](#). (Parts of the previous narrative recount of Joseph were adapted from Tanner's summary.)

⁶ Tanner, *ibid.*

them to hold him accountable for being so mean to them over the last few years – when they were starving, mind you! All these revenge tactics were even more cruel when you think about how dire the starvation situation was for everyone in Canaan.

In any case, after Joseph says his bit, he hugs all his brothers and everyone shares tears and talks and we can imagine it's quite the "Kum-ba-ya moment." No matter their initial intentions or motivations, no matter their reservations or any theologizing of the moment, the brothers are reunited...and from here on out...they are all together with their father Jacob and survive the years of famine and are even able to bury their father together when the time comes.

Now – there are many take aways from this story, but one I'd like us think about today is this: *Storytelling + Listening are the keys to the gospel work of reconciliation.*

You see, the only way Joseph gets to this moment in the story – this moment of revealing himself – is by listening, *finally listening*, to his brothers. He finally hears how dire things

are and how utterly distraught and grieved his father is. His concern for his dad really is the linchpin in this text. They've been saying this all along – but Joseph's been ignoring it or turning it out and when he finally listens, really listens, and hears the truth of what they are saying...it hits him in his gut.

So he drops the mask. He lets go of his power for a moment and he is vulnerable. As he reveals himself to his brothers, they are still shocked – and cannot recognize the man before him. So Joseph invites them to come closer and as he speaks and shares the story of the secret they had all held so long – of how they sold Joseph and lied about it to their dad – the brothers listen to his explanation of it all and how it all turned out for the good, at least according to Joseph. And in listening to his story (whether they agree that this was all for the best or not – they were the ones that had been starving and traveling, starving and traveling all these years!) and in physically coming close to Joseph – they recognize him.

Only after these moments of revelation and recognition does

reconciliation even begin to be a possibility. The text tells us that after they listened to each other, they began talking, presumably swapping stories about all that had gone on over so many years. Even if forgiveness wasn't had in that moment...they connected in such a way that they could all acknowledge that *"Yes, stuff happened in their past, and a fresh start was possible..."*

In both the Joseph story and the story of the two First Baptist Churches of Macon, Georgia, telling their stories and listening to one another led them to get to a place where they could say, *"Yes, all this happened to break us apart, and yes, we can still have a future together."*

As we begin this new set of spiritual practices in our *"Yes, And..."* series: Storytelling + Listening, I invite you to think about the stories in your past that need telling – if to no one else even but yourself. And I invite you to listen to what others around you are sharing. Ask yourself, are there voices I'm not hearing that I should be? Seek those people and their stories out. There are stories hidden between the lines of ordinary comments every day.

Often it just takes us probing a little deeper to say, *"Tell me more about that,"* when we hear someone make an offhand comment. An offhand comment is rarely ever "offhand" – there's usually a whole world behind it.

We could probably all start with our own families. Are there people in your family that you have written off that you need to listen to a little bit more closely? A brother? A sister? A parent? A child? Are there things in your past that are keeping you from healing, and therefore keeping you from moving forward into your future with freedom? Harboring grudges and ill will and spite and hurt and blame is a sure way to limit our futures. Yes, you can forgive others, and you can keep remembering what happened so that it's not just swept under the rug.

Again, think about the two First Baptist Churches of Macon, Georgia...they are not sweeping their story under the rug any longer. They're dealing with it – out in the open! Think of Joseph and his brothers. They are all finally coming clean about their past...so they can move forward. *Yes, stuff happens in our past, and a*

fresh start is possible. That, perhaps, is the very meaning of grace!

And many times the stories that need to be told are not bad...they are just “behind-the-scenes” or hidden in plain sight, if you will. As we move into this Stewardship season at Calvary, we move into a time where we celebrate our collective story as a church. We take an inventory of the past year and we dream about ministry for the upcoming year. Throughout the next few weeks, as we prepare to make financial commitments for 2019 on November 18th, I invite you to share the stories you witness each and every day in and around Calvary that often do not get told. Because our collective story is only as strong as our individual contributions to it...just as our collective giving is only as strong as our individual giving.

Yes, *your* story here at Calvary is important, and you can learn from everyone else’s story at Calvary. All kinds of stuff has happened in our past Calvary and that makes us who we are today...and the gospel truth is that a fresh start is always possible for us...as we listen to the God who is calling us to

ministry beyond what we could ever imagine for ourselves.

What “fresh starts” do you want...for yourself...and for Calvary...in the coming year? We are, after all, co-authors with God. What will our next chapter be?

Amen.