

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, Virginia
August 14, 2011

Genesis 45:1–15
Matthew 15:21–28

AMAZING JOSEPH

You may have already guessed that I want to take you somewhere this morning, someplace mentally that you may not want to go, a place you may not want to be again. First, we will allow the scripture to prepare us for those who are willing to enter this mental journey—this moving to a risky place. And then you will decide if you are willing to identify the scriptural reality I believe God is offering us today.

You see the index cards on each pew (you may be sitting on them). What I am going to ask you to do later in the sermon is to think about a time when you felt welcome in the church. I tried this out on our Music Director, Melvin Goodwyn, this morning and it was very clear that we were both church professionals, because he said: “Well, I have always felt welcome in the church.” And that is probably why we are both church professionals today, isn’t it, because we felt welcomed here? But think about your own time.

First, let’s look at the story from Matthew. Remember Matthew is the gospel most interested in convincing Jewish readers that Jesus is the Messiah, the One sent by God, the Anointed, fully God and yet fully human—sent to fulfill the blessing that God had promised for Israel through Joseph’s father and Joseph’s great-great grandfather, Abraham. And every time you remember that promise of chosenness for Israel, hold it in tension with the second part of what God promises: I will bless you; I will bless your children, so that they may be a blessing for others. Jesus knows this plan—this grand plan for God choosing a people. They are to become a blessing to their neighbors, and these neighbors who will be blessed will then become a blessing. And no matter who you are, neighbor or first included, those added later, or the very ones that God spoke to like Abraham and Jacob, you can hear God’s promise in Joseph’s words to his brothers. No matter who you are, you will understand that we are all God’s favorites.

Jesus tells this story in Matthew and uses the metaphor of Himself as a cook—a cook whose has children who are not ready to eat. Has that ever happened at your house? Supper is ready and no one will come to the table. Children who are misbehaving or children who are in the habit of behaving badly—that is still not a good enough reason for Jesus to take their supper and turn it into table scraps. All because Jesus understands the grand plan—the ultimate will of God, the reason God chose people in the beginning. So in light of our awareness of what Matthew is doing, the retelling of this encounter with the Canaanite woman doesn’t sound so harsh after all, does it? Yes it does! It’s a hard story. It’s a tough one.

This brings us to another hard story about Joseph and his brothers. God’s plan is still in place, but Joseph’s brothers decided to make their own plan. They are going to deal

with the fact that Joseph received a little too much attention and approval—too many “atta boys” from his father. So his brothers come up with a plan to sell Joseph into slavery. He ends up in Egypt. He becomes part of Pharaoh’s household. Joseph spends some time in prison, not because of anything he has done wrong—he is a victim. Then he becomes Pharaoh’s trusted advisor—because Pharaoh is a dreamer, and Joseph has the gift of interpreting dreams. He is an advisor who becomes a ruler, and Joseph is manager for seven years of plentiful harvests—a trustee of the bounty and the blessings that God has promised, all because Pharaoh dreamed about it and the famine, and Joseph was there to interpret their new reality.

So in the midst of this famine, Jacob sends all his sons, well, almost all. He keeps Rachel’s other child with him. Did we mention that he had a favorite wife too? He sends them to Egypt. Joseph encounters them, plays some tricks on them, makes them jump through some hoops, if you will. He has the upper hand because he recognizes them but they don’t recognize who he is. He toys with them. Some things never change. But finally he can bear it no longer. God’s greater plan overwhelms him. Finally he surrenders. He forgives. He submits to the Holy Spirit. He shares not only his wealth, but his prestige. He cannot wait for his father to see what has happened to him.

Do we remember often and profoundly enough that God is in the business of healing us, that God is in the business of forgiving us and helping us to forgive others, and thereby they are healed, where healing and wholeness and forgiveness and reconciliation all get mingled together so that they are indistinguishable?

I said I was going to take you someplace that is risky. So now here is the hard part. Maybe this is preparation for sending all our college students back to school and for all the kids who are still at home preparing for their studies in the coming weeks. Take those index cards, even if you are not going to write on them, and play along with this one, okay? Take those index cards in each pew and pass them to your neighbor. Now if you don’t want to risk this exercise, no one is going to make you. That will be okay. But, if you are willing, here is where I want us to go together.

First, go to that place where you felt uncomfortable, that place where you last felt decidedly ill at ease. Maybe it was around your spouse’s colleagues or your spouse’s friends. Maybe it was at your child’s first back-to-school event. Maybe it was at a team try-out for someone you loved, or the first day of a new assignment at work, or meeting that new employer for the first time. Usually we feel some sense of discomfort when we are not entirely sure of the role that we are to play or the responsibility we have. No matter how brave or strong, we have all felt it—that crummy feeling in our gut of facing the unknown, meeting new people or ultimately feeling left out, maybe because we were in over our head or we could just sense that we weren’t welcome. It’s a lousy feeling, isn’t it? And we will do pretty much anything to avoid revisiting that experience or that place.

So, now comes the risky part. These can be signed or be anonymous, but imagine feeling that way at church. Now for some of us, it’s hard, I know because we have always felt welcome. But for others of us, this has not always been the most positive of experi-

ences. Truth be told, there have been times when we felt like an outsider. I don't think anyone purposely wakes up on Sunday and comes to a church event at any time during the week and sets out to make someone else feel unwelcome. I just don't think coming to church and that kind of attitude are part of the same motivation. After all, maybe it's not us at all. Maybe someone is here out of the insistence of a spouse. Maybe someone is here reluctantly because of perceptions of what their children need. Maybe they are here because of their parents. No, don't raise your hands!

Here is what I want you to put on that index card and then drop it in the offering plate or leave it on the table just outside the doorway beyond the organ. Do you feel welcome at your church? If you do, what makes you feel welcome? If you don't, what makes you feel unwelcome? What gets in the way? What do you really love about being here? If you prefer, and you are someone who doesn't like things at the last second, without a lot of time to prepare or to take it in, you can e-mail me at pastor@bushhill.org. I felt just a little unwelcome when that e-mail address was first introduced to me, as if, you know, this was going to be the e-mail whether I was the pastor or not. For some of us, if we don't do this now, we won't ever, so e-mail is not an option. Maybe your response will help us become a more vital congregation. Maybe it will just inform us about places where we need to pray or work together. Either way, if it is just information or it's a change in destination, it's good.

But, let's be very clear. God wants to bless us as much as He wanted to bless Joseph and his family. And God wants to make us into a blessing for others. So even if we are here because it matters more to someone else that we are here, God is willing and able to be with us. God's plan for us—the grand plan for all of creation—is that we will understand how much God loves us and we will begin to look at one another very differently. But it is easy to get confused. Old histories take over. Maybe we look around and we see all the regulars in church and we think they pretty much have it under control, and there is no place for us. We don't feel needed or wanted or embraced. Some of us are here even though we think others wouldn't welcome us if they knew the truth about us—if they knew the problems we face. Or maybe, just maybe, they would. Joseph was able to welcome us back. Jesus still does. What an amazing faith we share.

Amen.