

The Gift of Abundant Grace

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Genesis 43:31–34 (NIV)

³¹After he [Joseph] had washed his face, he came out and, controlling himself, said, “Serve the food.”

³²They served him by himself, the brothers by themselves, and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves, because Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, for that is detestable to Egyptians. ³³The men had been seated before him in the order of their ages, from the firstborn to the youngest; and they looked at each other in astonishment. ³⁴When portions were served to them from Joseph’s table, Benjamin’s portion was five times as much as anyone else’s. So they feasted and drank freely with him.

2 Samuel 9:7–13 (NIV)

⁷“Don’t be afraid,” David said to him, “for I will surely show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan. I will restore to you all the land that belonged to your grandfather Saul, and you will always eat at my table.”

⁸Mephibosheth bowed down and said, “What is your servant, that you should notice a dead dog like me?”

⁹Then the king summoned Ziba, Saul’s steward, and said to him, “I have given your master’s grandson everything that belonged to Saul and his family. ¹⁰You and your sons and your servants are to farm the land for him and bring in the crops, so that your master’s grandson may be provided for. And Mephibosheth, grandson of your master, will always eat at my table.” (Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty servants.)

¹¹Then Ziba said to the king, “Your servant will do whatever my lord the king commands his servant to do.” So Mephibosheth ate at David’s table like one of the king’s sons.

¹²Mephibosheth had a young son named Mika, and all the members of Ziba’s household were servants of Mephibosheth. ¹³And Mephibosheth lived in Jerusalem, because he always ate at the king’s table; he was lame in both feet.

To be radically hospitable is to offer the gift of abundant grace.

Underlying every act of truly radical hospitality is an act of grace. More is given than is needed. More is given than is deserved. This week, we have two stories of radical hospitality that are enactments of grace.

The story of Joseph

Abraham was the father of Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who was the father of twelve sons, from whom God would grow the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph was the youngest of Jacob’s twelve sons, the long-awaited child of Rachel, Jacob’s true love. If you’ve seen the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, you know the basics of the story.

Joseph’s life begins with great hope. He has a gift for dreams that reveal much. He is his father’s favorite. Jacob gives him a beautiful coat to wear and frees him from the hard work assigned to his eleven brothers. But there is a darkness present as well. Jacob’s favoritism and Joseph’s dreams create an explosive family situation.

The brothers’ envy and anger eventually boil over. They consider killing the boy, who is perhaps seventeen or so. Instead, they sell him to some passing Ishmaelite traders which is nonetheless tantamount to killing him. Indeed, the brothers make up a story about his violent death for their heart-stricken father, even using Joseph’s beautiful coat to lend credence to their lie.

Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant to the captain of Pharaoh’s guard, Potiphar. Joseph has to reject the sexual advances of Potiphar’s wife, who accuses Joseph of trying to rape her and has him tossed into prison. Joseph’s gift for interpreting dreams gets him out of prison and, remarkably, he rises to become chief administrator of Pharaoh’s empire.

Joseph's dreams reveal to him that there will soon be a lengthy famine in Egypt. Armed with this foresight, Joseph saves Egypt from starvation. When the famine threatens Canaan, Jacob's sons make their way to Egypt to buy food. There, they stand before Pharaoh's right-hand man . . . Joseph! The brother's don't recognize him, but Joseph sure recognizes them. He accuses them of being spies and says he will sell them grain, but they must bring the missing brother (for they have traveled without Benjamin¹) to show that they have told the truth. Joseph hangs on to Simeon to ensure their return. But, of course, the question is whether they will return? Or will they abandon Simeon as they "abandoned" Joseph?

Though it will become clear that Joseph wants to heal the breach with his brothers, it is understandable that he would set things up so that he can observe his brothers and see what comes of it all. The brothers claim to be "honest" but are they? Have they learned anything since their sale of the young Joseph? Also, by his questions, Joseph is able to learn about the family circumstances.

There are many twists and turns in the story, and Joseph has a lot of trouble keeping control of his emotions through it all. It is a well-told tale and I hope you'll grab a copy of Peterson's *The Message* and read the whole thing (Genesis 37-50). It might even be a little hard for you to remember that you are reading the Bible.

At last, the truth

The brothers do return to Egypt to buy more grain. Then, in the brief scene that is the Scripture passage for today, Joseph sets a meal before his brothers – and young Benjamin receives the most sumptuous meal of all.

In the end, too overcome with emotion to go on with the deception, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers. Can you imagine the shock of the brothers when the "prime minister" reveals himself?! Their shock quickly gives way to fear. The brothers have every reason to expect that Joseph will exact revenge for their evil deed, that their family's cycle of treachery and hostility will roll on.

But the brothers do not know what we, the readers, know. God has been with Joseph in all things and Joseph knows it. Upon the births of his own sons, Manasseh and Ephraim,² Joseph said "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house³ . . . For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortune" (41:51-52).

And now, with everything out in the open, Jacob's whole family will move down to Egypt, where they will live under the protection of Pharaoh and Joseph.⁴

God's grace and God's work

Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers is God's amazing grace at work in their lives and relationships; the meal was a small enactment of the grace that would soon pour over the brothers. It is God who is able to break the cycle of deceit in their family. It is God alone who can enable us to set aside our pride, to overlook the wrongs committed against us. It is God who empowers us to embrace and to forgive, time and again if need be, those in our family we love and those we must learn to love.

And through all these stories of Jacob and his sons, through all the deceit and treachery, God was moving events and people forward toward the covenant that God had made with Abraham, Jacob's grandfather.

¹Benjamin is the youngest of the brothers and is Joseph's only full brother, having been born to Rachel, Jacob's lifelong love. She died during Benjamin's birth.

²Joseph takes a Egyptian wife. Before his death, Jacob adopts the two sons as his own and Joseph's tribal allotment goes to his sons. Thus, in the lists of tribes, Ephraim and Manasseh are included. The books of the prophets can often be confusing because they frequently use the name of one the tribes to stand in for all Israel, Thus, the prophets will address Dan or Judah or Ephraim, for example, when they are bringing God's word to the people of God.

³Joseph means that he has forgotten the cycles of deceit and envy in which he was raised.

⁴But another shock lies ahead, for the family's descendants become enslaved by later Pharaohs (see Ex. 1).

Now, our attention moves ahead almost a thousand years to the reign of King David, who will use his own table to extend gracious hospitality.

A crushing exile

To be born the grandson of a king. Little Mephibosheth (don't you wonder if he had a nickname) was surely the darling of the entire royal household and all the people of Israel. You can bet that he was adored and doted upon. Yet, the boy's life soon took a tragic turn. At the age of five, his grandfather, King Saul, and father, Jonathan, were killed in battle against Israel's arch enemies, the Philistines. Fearing that the Philistines would march upon the palace, the royal household fled in panic. One of the nurses grabbed Mephibosheth but accidentally dropped the boy, permanently crippling him in both legs (2 Samuel 4:4). Though they made it away safely, things went from bad to worse, at least from the perspective of Saul's family. David, whom Saul had tried to hunt down and kill, was made king over the tribe of Judah and eight years later was made king over all the tribes of Israel. He would have the power of life and death. Saul's family was right to expect that they were as good as dead. . . . Yet, grace amazes and surprises.

At the king's table

David and Saul's son, Jonathan had been friends for a long time. Nonetheless, it had often been pretty one-sided. Twice, Jonathan had pledged himself to David without reciprocation. The pledges were Jonathan's freely-given gifts. But on the third occasion, both men had made a covenant, the pledges were mutual.

After David, as the new king of the united Israel, defeated Israel's enemies and conquered Jerusalem, he sought a way to keep his covenant with Jonathan, even after his death in battle. David asked Ziba, a long-time servant in Saul's household whether any of Saul's family still lived, so that David could extend mercy and kindness toward them. David might be a busy king, but there is always time for mercy.

Ziba reveals to David that Jonathan's son has survived and is living in the home of Makir. By now, Mephibosheth is about twenty.⁵ Mephibosheth is old enough to know that to the king, at least to most kings, he is as good as a "dead dog."

So, when he is summoned before the king, Mephibosheth perhaps expects that David plans on getting rid of all potential opposition, as was customary with many rulers then and now. David, however, ensures the continuation of Saul's household by inviting Mephibosheth to eat at David's table, giving all of Saul's estate to him, and asking the young man to live in the palace. In so doing, David takes Mephibosheth in like a son.

This is yet another example of biblical hospitality. David takes a potential rival into his own home and has him always eat at the king's table. This is grace made visible, given freely and abundantly. This is truly radical hospitality.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday, Genesis 37 Joseph's dreams	Tuesday, Genesis 42 Joseph's brothers go to Egypt, where Joseph is now the most powerful administrator in the kingdom.
Wednesday, Genesis 45 Joseph makes himself known to his brothers.	Thursday, 2 Samuel 9 David and Mephibosheth
Friday, 2 Samuel 16:1-4; 19:24-30 Mephibosheth is accused of siding with Absalom in his rebellion against David, his father.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

⁵Putting together a chronology is a little difficult, but at least ten years had passed and probably more. Time did not diminish David's desire to be faithful to his covenant.

The Hospitality Code – Strangers and Hosts from the *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*

Hospitality customs provided ways whereby strangers could be welcomed and made guests and might depart as friends instead of as strangers or enemies. For this process to run smoothly people had to carry out their roles as host, stranger/guest or servant. There were four phases in hospitality: initial invitation, screening, provision and protection, and departure.

Outsiders were suspect and had to be approached cautiously, but for a community not to approach them with a ready invitation would be dishonorable and could result in violence. During the nomadic period strangers approaching an encampment might be intercepted before reaching it (Gen 18:2), thus it became customary for travelers approaching a town or city to wait in an open place, such as the well or the city gate for a preliminary invitation to be extended (Gen 19:1-2; 24:23-25, 31-33; Ex 2:20; 1 Kings 17:10; 2 Kings 4:8-10; Job 31:32; Acts 16:13-15). The failure of a community to approach the strangers and issue an invitation before nightfall to dine and lodge in an established household was a serious breach of honor signifying an insult toward the strangers and an indication of the locals' bad character (Judg 19:15, 18; cf. v. 20, where the custom is properly enacted).

Strangers had to be assessed in some way to discern their intentions (Josh 2:2-3; Gen 19:4-5; 42:7). In various biblical contexts we observe instances of this. In the NT a traveling teacher, might be asked to speak (Acts 13:15). A letter of recommendation might be presented but was not always accepted (Rom 16:3-16; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 2 and 3 John). The stranger would either be asked to leave (cf. Mk 5:17, where the Gerasenes ask Jesus to leave) or would be advanced to the next step and received as a guest.

The host assumed the responsibilities of providing food, water and lodging for the guests and their animals (Gen 24:23-25; 26:30; 31:1-33, 54; 43:16, 24). The host usually was a male head of household but might be a woman of means. Examples include the widow who hosted Elijah (1 Kings 17:10); the wealthy woman who set up a room for Elisha (2 Kings 4:8-10); the NT women who provided for Jesus (Lk 8:2-3); Jesus' friends Mary and Martha, who took him into their home (Lk 10:38; Jn 12:1-3); and the women of the early church who hosted church meetings and, like Lydia, provided for traveling missionaries (Acts 16:13-15).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Has grace been ever been extended to you when you've arrived somewhere as a stranger? How did that make you feel? Can you share a story of a time when a door was slammed in your face, at least figuratively? How did that make you feel? What would it look like if we at St. Andrew more ardently followed the examples of Joseph and David in extending abundant grace.

Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands in its own.

This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying the Gospel of John

Meet from 11:45 to 1:00 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

Monday Evening Class – now studying Revelation

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall on Monday evenings.

Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at www.standrewumc.org. Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon.

There is also an archive of nearly 500 studies at www.scottengle.org