

"Come Closer to Me"
(Genesis 45:3-11, 15)
February 20, 2022

"I am Joseph." How did Joseph's half-brothers feel when they heard that? In their minds, their father, Jacob, had twelve sons indeed, but Joseph was the one mentioned as "one is no more." (Gen 42:13) Joseph was the most beloved of their father, and they called him a dreamer since he told them dreams that showed them, including their father, no respect. (Gen 37: 18-20) They came up with a plot to kill him. They changed the plan at the last minute and sold him for twenty pieces of silver to some Midianite traders. Naturally, they had no idea what happened to Joseph after that. The expression "who is no more" meant a lot to them. Their jealousy, hatred against him, and intention of murdering him were all hidden behind it.

"I am Joseph." Joseph saw his brothers once already before he said that. He didn't disclose his identity when he first saw them. Maybe he was still considering what to do with them. There was a famine. Jacob sent his sons to Egypt to buy food. Egypt was where the Midianite traders brought Joseph, but the brothers didn't expect to see Joseph alive and prosper there. They couldn't imagine that the person who wore the ring of Pharaoh, in charge of the entire country of Egypt, with an Egyptian name Zaphenath-Paneah, and spoke to them, was their brother. Due to the difficulties in his life there, Joseph had become a different person, more mature and subtle. He didn't disclose to others what was in his mind spontaneously, as what he did when he was young. He had a younger brother Benjamin from his biological mother, Rachel. He wanted to know if his half-brothers mistreated him, like how they did to him. So he held one of his half-

brothers, Simeon, hostage and made them believe that he must see Benjamin the next time they met; otherwise, he'll punish them severely. (Gn 42) They returned safely home with food at no cost, except their brother Simeon. The famine got worse. They were reluctant to go to Egypt again since Jacob didn't allow Benjamin to go. Finally, Jacob gave in since their food was running out, and they didn't know how long the famine would last.

On their second trip to Egypt, they brought Benjamin with them. Joseph was delighted to see his younger brother, but he didn't think it was the right moment to disclose his identity. So he put them into another test instead that would hold Benjamin hostage. He wanted to know how much they cared about their youngest brother. And Judah's sacrifice of himself to save Benjamin which convinced Joseph that they did care about Benjamin and their father, Jacob, who loved Joseph so much.

That's the right moment Joseph chose to disclose his identity. Was it the final answer, though? We all have hearts that function mysteriously within us. Is it easy to forget about hatred and hurtful moments? Joseph was good-looking, clever, and able. He spoke his mind expressed his feelings and opinions frankly without hiding when he was young. Some might find him a dream partner, but some might feel the opposite. When we look at ourselves seriously, we see that we have a lot of adorable as well as unwanted characters like Joseph that drew people's attention, stirring up wanted and unwanted troubles.

Last week, we questioned the standards that being poor, having hunger, and needing to cry are curses, while being rich, well-fed, and happy are blessings. Can we justify the questioning of all these before we agree or disagree?

Being poor - In the year 2020, the GDP per capita of Hong Kong was approx. US\$ 46,000, Canada was US\$ 43,000, and Vietnam was US\$ 2800. So do you think the Hongkongers had better health, better relationships with family and friends, and more fulfilling careers than Canadians, and Canadians were better in the same ways than Vietnamese? The number in the bank account and our possessions aren't the only indicators of rich and poor. The Hongkongers have lost their freedom of speech, freedom of everything, even personal safety. Should we Canadians be envious because they had a higher GDP per capita than ours? Canada is a rich country. However, life in such a society is stressful. Living in countries with a lower GDP per capita doesn't necessarily imply having less spiritual fulfillment.

Having hunger - Hunger is a feeling of discomfort or weakness caused by lacking food, coupled with the desire to eat. It isn't a pleasant feeling, but some people intentionally eat very little to get that feeling. Abstain from some or all kinds of food or drink is not unknown in Christianity and other religions. It's the practice of strict self-denial, abstinence from sensual pleasures, often to pursue specific spiritual goals. So does it mean that people without specific spiritual goals won't practice fasting and experience starvation? Some researchers reported that the long-term effects of occasional starvation could lower the mortality rate by up to 45 percent or the occurrence of heart failure by up to 71 percent. What do you think? Would you try too? If we take "food" out from the formula and put some acquired needs into it, we might more easily see the benefit. What would you feel about life if you could live without the hindrance of drugs, pain avoidance, approval-seeking, micro-managing, sex, or sleep? Hunger creates an inner space

within us that enables us to adopt a different lifestyle when it becomes available. If we are well-fed, we can't take in anything anymore.

Needing to cry – Do outward expressions of sadness, like crying, signs of weakness and insecurity? Is it damaging, unhealthy, and unfair for holding an opinion like that to this essential human experience? "Jesus wept" is the shortest verse in the King James Version of the Bible. (John 11:35) Jesus went to visit Lazarus, who died. After talking to his grieving sisters and their weeping friends, he was troubled and deeply moved, and then he wept. It's not a bad thing at all for being sorry for the sorrow and the suffering of this world. It only shows that we, as normal human beings, can show compassion to misfortunes that happened, even though we don't have family or friends who suffered in China, North Korea, India, Cuba, or anywhere in this world.

"I am Joseph." No one expected to see him again. "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt." And this would be the main reason why seeing Joseph was the last thing on their bucket lists. "Come closer to me." Was it a blessing or a curse? No one would know if the poor Joseph would consider revenge as his spiritual fulfillment. What his biggest desire has become after all these? What he was crying for - Benjamin and his father, or his mishaps? Even though Joseph had tested his brothers twice, it was hard for Joseph at that moment to tell whether he would put everything behind him or not.

It's story time:

A disciple whispered, "Why is everyone here so happy except me?"
"Because they have learned to see goodness and beauty everywhere,"
said the master.

"Why don't I see goodness and beauty everywhere like others?"

"You cannot see outside of you because you failed to see inside."

"Fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth. The one who has inflicted the injury must suffer the same injury." (Leviticus 24: 20) It's reasonable for Joseph to choose to live by the accepted norm of retribution. However, Joseph decided to live by different standards, values, and an alternative way of being. "Come closer to me." These were Joseph's words to his brothers, and he used it as a blessing. It's easy for us to say have mercy on us without saying the same to those who hurt us. Therefore, we must go deeper to see the inside before going higher and broader and love as God loves. Amen.