

Welcome

How many of you have seen the show *Undercover Boss*? It's a reality show that's currently in its eleventh season. The plot is pretty simple: the CEO of a large company goes undercover, working in their own business as a front-line employee. Maybe they drive a truck, or wait tables or serve in the kitchen.

They get to see what their company is like on the ground (which only works because they're undercover). If everyone knew the CEO was there, they'd act differently. But because they think it's just some new guy, they act the way they usually do.

Everyone's favorite part of the show is, of course, the end, when the CEO reveals themselves to their employees. They punish the people who were rotten and reward - often in dramatic ways - the people who are truly good employees.

Are there spaces in your life where you wish you could go undercover? Maybe you wish you could be around the dinner table while your family was talking about you. Or maybe you wish you could go undercover at work. Or in a friendship.

We like *Undercover Boss* because it gives us an unfiltered look at how people are when we're not around. But the question we don't ask ourselves is whether or not we're the kind of person who's ready to see the truth.

Message

Welcome to the season of Epiphany! This time in the church year, we ask who God is. Who is this one who came to us on Christmas?

This year, our series is called Deep Breaths. We're at the beginning of 2022, almost two full years into the COVID-19 pandemic. We're all tired. We're all wondering how many more variants we'll have to deal with, how much longer until we can relax a little.

The idea of *doing* more right now is exhausting. So we're not doing. We're resting - resting in who God is.

In both Greek and Hebrew, the same word means both 'breath' and 'spirit'. So as we breathe deeply here at the beginning of the year, we're also pausing to make space for God's Spirit to fill us.

Given the last couple of years, we could use some comfort, some of God's presence. And we all want to know: When is this going to be over?

We began last week where we should always begin: with an assurance that God is with us. We named our trauma and affirmed how important our gathering for worship is. We affirmed that God calls and equips us even now for the common good. We've seen that to be God's people is to be engaged in the world around us - not detached. And we saw that it takes spiritual practices to root us deeply in that space.

Today, as we're nearing the end of Epiphany, I want to ask a question that I know haunts me and I bet haunts a lot of us. Is there any repairing the relationships that have bent or even broken over the last several years?

We all have family, friends, co-workers who have done us harm. People who have revealed themselves to be toxic, abusive, opportunistic or just selfish. As the pandemic has worn on, we wonder what it looks like even to have a healthy, whole relationship with them. Is it possible? Is it even good to want?

Turn with me to [Genesis 45](#).

This is near the end of the story of Joseph. You might be familiar with the larger beats of Joseph's story. He's the eleventh of his father's twelve sons. And because he's the firstborn of his father's favorite wife, he's the favorite (with his little brother, Benjamin a close second).

Joseph has a superpower - he can interpret dreams. And when he's just a kid, he dreams that one day, he's going to be as powerful as the sun and his father and brothers will bow at his feet.

That proclamation... doesn't go over well. In fact, his brothers decide to kill him. Then they back off and elect just to sell him into slavery and tell his dad a wild animal killed him.

Joseph ends up in Egypt as a slave. And despite the fact that he always tries to do right and serve God, he lands in prison for a crime he didn't commit. He's in prison for years... until Pharaoh needs a dream interpreted.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dream is a warning - a seven-year famine is coming, one that will devastate the whole region. But they have seven years to prepare. Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the preparation, and when the famine hits, Joseph remains in charge of food distribution. He's the second most powerful person in the most powerful empire in the world.

And guess who shows up?

His brothers. All ten of the guys who sold him into slavery. They don't recognize Joseph - they all think he's long dead, or wasting away as a slave.

It's an undercover boss situation. Joseph has the chance to see if his brothers have changed. So he concocts this elaborate ruse that you're going to have to go read on your own. But long story short, he figures out that yes, they have changed. They're genuinely sorry for what they've done and they've grown up.

I want to read with you the scene where Joseph finally reveals his true identity to them, then go back and ask a couple of key questions.

Joseph could stand it no longer. There were many people in the room, and he said to his attendants, “Out, all of you!” So he was alone with his brothers when he told them who he was. Then he broke down and wept. He wept so loudly the Egyptians could hear him, and word of it quickly carried to Pharaoh’s palace.

“I am Joseph!” he said to his brothers. “Is my father still alive?” But his brothers were speechless! They were stunned to realize that Joseph was standing there in front of them. “Please, come closer,” he said to them. So they came closer. And he said again, “I am Joseph, your brother, whom you sold into slavery in Egypt. But don’t be upset, and don’t be angry with yourselves for selling me to this place. It was God who sent me here ahead of you to preserve your lives. This famine that has ravaged the land for two years will last five more years, and there will be neither plowing nor harvesting. God has sent me ahead of you to keep you and your families alive and to preserve many survivors. So it was God who sent me here, not you! And he is the one who made me an adviser to Pharaoh—the manager of his entire palace and the governor of all Egypt. -- Genesis 45:1–8 (NLT)

Overall, this is a beautiful scene. I hope we can all be struck by the power of Joseph’s revelation here. He’s so relieved to be able to be honest finally with his family, to be reunited in a real, meaningful way with his brothers.

He even takes time to assure his brothers not to be afraid (which, can you *imagine* how they felt? They come to Egypt and have truly bizarre interactions with the most powerful man besides Pharaoh. And then it turns out it’s the brother they sold into slavery all those years ago. How would *you* feel?

Maybe if your family drives you a little crazy, don’t feel so bad.

I do want to hang out on Joseph’s assurance to them for a moment. Joseph says, “Don’t be upset or angry with yourselves, because God did this, not you.”

On its face, this is a troubling claim. When people abuse us, it’s not really their fault? Because God made them do it for some greater good?

There are Christians who claim this sort of thing, but let’s be clear: this is abusive. A god who would subject anyone to pain and suffering - especially without our consent - is not a god of love.

Even if it’s for the greater good. (Is there another phrase that is responsible for more suffering and injustice?)

God does not inflict suffering on us. Not because we deserve it. Not for some alleged greater good. Never.

Rather, what we see in Jesus is what the apostle Paul describes in [Romans 8](#):

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them. -- Romans 8:28 (NLT)

Does God *cause* evil? No. Does God *make* our abusers abuse us? No. But God is not content to let evil flourish. God will not allow evil to have the last word. God, like a master weaver, turns agony into beauty.

And that's what we see in Joseph's story: by the time Joseph meets his brothers as adults, he has grown to the place where he can welcome them. And that's what I want to spend our last little while on: what this text shows us about forgiveness and reconciliation.

First, it's important to note that, before they ever met again, everyone had grown and changed. The brothers felt genuine remorse for what they'd done, and Joseph was significantly more humble (it's worth noting that his vision came true, and he could have performed the greatest 'I told you so' of all time).

For there to be hope of reconciliation, we have to have experienced genuine change.

Here this: on *both* sides. Both the person in the wrong and in the person wronged.

Think about a time you know you were in the wrong. You likely experienced a massive amount of guilt or shame. Anger at yourself. Fear of how the other person will react when you come clean, or fear of facing the consequences of your actions.

Unfortunately, that fear and shame can be barriers to real repentance, even after we accept that we were in the wrong. Genuine change in behavior is scary, and both the victim *and* the victimizer have to be in a space where they are ready for genuine reconciliation.

I wonder about this for myself quite a lot with regards to the pandemic: as this wears on, and as we see more and more folks finally agreeing to get vaccinated, or people who refused to wear masks or take precautions who then get COVID and feel genuine sorrow, who realize they were wrong:

Can I forgive them? Can I make it *easy* for them to admit they want to get vaccinated? Can I celebrate with them rather than feeling smug?

I want to be angry. I want to say, "It's about time!" But if I'm being honest, that's because what's under that anger is a deep grief - at the friends and family I've lost to COVID. At the way our society has changed forever. At the suffering of my friends in healthcare and education and anyone who hasn't had the privilege to work from home. At how we've felt it here at Catalyst worshiping virtually for so long.

I have so much hurt from the last couple of years, and if I can't heal from that hurt, I can't reconcile with those folks who are genuinely repentant.

That's why we've spent time talking about naming our pain, trusting God to be at work to redeem us and even our collective calling. This is how God heals us. This is how God prepares us to be agents of reconciliation.

Because, in the end, isn't this what we want to become? A people who, like Joseph, create space for each other to heal?

Barely a month ago, the world grieved the death of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who led South Africa's famous Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In the wake of the fall of South Africa's apartheid government, Tutu insisted their path forward would be characterized not by retribution but restoration. He wanted to focus not on an evening of scales, but a righting of wrongs.

So, in publicly broadcast trials, Tutu invited both the victims and the perpetrators of apartheid violence to come forward and tell their stories. For many, it was the first time they'd ever been confronted with the real violence done under the racist regime. And to the perpetrators, Tutu and the Commission offered a blanket amnesty: come confess your crimes - all of them - and there would be no further punishment.

Many were angry at this, but listen to Tutu describe it:

"However painful the experience, the wounds of the past must not be allowed to fester. They must be opened. They must be cleansed. And balm must be poured on them so they can heal."

And so husbands and fathers sat before the commission and detailed their worst crimes, often breaking families and friendships as secrets and divided loyalties spilt into the open.

One of the former commissioners, a human rights lawyer named Dumisa Ntsebeza, said, *"People said amnesty was cheap. Cheap how? Simply because people don't go to jail?"*

"In fact, amnesty was a kind of justice even weightier than what we would have got through the criminal justice system. In an amnesty application, you would say yourself what you did, in detail. It came out of your mouth, with your own lawyer sitting next to you. It's a sentence for life. You can't wash that off."

Joseph wasn't interested in getting even. What would that even mean in his current situation? He recognized that, whatever evil his brothers meant, God had worked in Joseph's suffering to bring about good - not just for Joseph, but for his whole family.

It was specifically *because* Joseph was committed to God's way, to growing and loving and creating space where the seeds of the brothers' genuine repentance could flourish.

So what of us? Are we doing the work right now to name our pain, to work through the hurt and trauma of the last two years? Will we be ready for our own truth and reconciliation? Will we as a church be ready to heal Rowlett? Heal our families? Heal our culture?

Communion + Examen

Jesus invites us to the table as a space for repentance.

What relationships have suffered in my life?

How is God calling me to engage those relationships?

How can I create space for forgiveness?

How can I create space for reconciling?

Assignment + Blessing