

Joseph and His Brothers: A Bible Study on Beloved Community

By Rev. Yana Pagan

Set-up:

- This Bible study is set around an “agapé feast,” or a shared meal. Invite participants ahead of time to bring in an appetizer, enough for the group to share. They should consider what they would typically serve a guest coming to their home for a celebration. If they have an appetizer that has some special meaning to them (a traditional ethnic food, one they remember eating at their grandma’s house growing up, something they love serving at the holidays, etc.), let them know they’ll have the chance to share its story.
- Consider this as a feast, a true communion experience. Consider the environment. Remember that today’s session features Joseph welcoming his brothers and, especially, Benjamin.. How do you spend time with your cherished ones? See if you can set up the space with a similar feeling of hospitality and celebration.
- Select quiet background music and have the method needed to play it (optional).
- Have at least one Bible available.
- If you choose one of the optional activities listed at the end, be sure you have appropriate supplies.

Gathering

Quiet prayer: Invite everyone to be seated and spend some time in silent prayer. Have instrumental, worshipful music playing quietly in the background (optional).

Open with a prayer of Thanksgiving:

Lord God, we thank you for bringing us together! We thank you for the food that we are about to receive and the hands that brought it to share. Thank you for the reminder of community we have in this time together. As we talk about and, hopefully, experience community we invite you, Lord of Love, to be our honored guest. Teach us what we need to learn about ourselves and our neighbor to enable us to be together in peace. We thank you, Lord Jesus, for your example and pray that we might be loving towards one another. In Jesus name, Amen.

Read the following:

The Beloved Community as defined by Martin Luther King Jr.: “Peace with justice will prevail over war and military conflict. Dr. King’s Beloved Community was not devoid of interpersonal, group or international conflict. Instead he recognized that conflict was an inevitable part of human experience. But he believed that conflicts could be resolved peacefully and adversaries could be reconciled through a mutual, decided commitment to nonviolence. No conflict, he believed, need erupt in violence. And all conflicts in The Beloved Community should end with reconciliation of adversaries cooperating in a spirit of friendship and goodwill.”

(Accessed August 6, 2017, www.thekingcenter.org)

“Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love.” *(Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.)*

The Beloved Community manifests and projects *agapé* love as its guiding principle. *Agapé* love is also expressed through our Baptist life of discipleship, our prophetic role, our mission, diversity, worship and communion, and our love of the Bible.

In this gathering, we want to celebrate our friendship, our relationship with one another—what we mean to each other by just being together. One of the things we sometimes forget to do is *enjoy* being together. As we begin eating, I invite each of you to describe what you brought to share and whether it has any special meaning or special memories for you. Let's enjoy sharing a meal together.

(Invite participants to share in the meal together. If you have enough time, consider eating and talking together for several minutes before entering the time of Bible study.)

Invite a volunteer to read Genesis 37:12-36, and another to read Genesis 45:1-28.

Share the following in your own words:

In Genesis 45, Joseph tells his brothers that it was not they who led him to Egypt, but God. Meeting his brothers is no easy task for Joseph. I believe that it was Joseph's maturity and realization of what God had done in his life that changed him and made him ready to meet his brothers. Do you think he would have been ready to meet them had he not seen the hand of God in his life?

Joseph saw that God had a purpose for him that went beyond even his own understanding. This understanding, however, did not make right the fact that his brothers had sold him into slavery. It just means that God used all situations in Joseph's life and turned them into glory. Even the situation with Potiphar's wife, which could have led to death, showed God's hand as well. With all his years in prison, Joseph matured—not because of the hand of man, but because of the hand of God. God changes the heart, not just the mind.

Inviting his brothers to share a meal is important for the brothers and for Joseph. Culturally, it is a sign of forgiveness. The family may now sit at the table together again.

Ask: Is there a place in your life where you can sit at the table with one who has wronged you, for the glory of God? Is there a place where God is calling you to work to become the Beloved Community? *(If the group does not know one another well, consider having paper or notebooks available and invite a few moments of journaling about this question.)*

After a few moments, say the following in your own words:

This forgiveness is clearly not easy for Joseph. If we look at the whole story, even Joseph does some things that are not right. Ethically, accusing his brothers of stealing to keep Benjamin is wrong. That really could have killed his father with grief. Yet, at that time, Joseph was probably still being healed himself by the Spirit of God. We are only given one side of the story, but we can imagine a bit of it, knowing family dynamics. As a family, it is important to sit together, to find forgiveness over a shared meal.

As women, we know what it means to sit together for tea or coffee. We prepare meals in death, life, and many other situations. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel discusses this in her book *Rediscovering Friendship*. She presents it in such a way that it reminds us of the beloved community. She points out that we can too often be unconscious of what we are doing when we share a meal, even celebrating the Eucharist. That is such a powerful thought, because we are

called to foster community in churches and we can sometimes forget that. So, let's take a moment to pay attention to what we have been doing in this time together today. Have we not been having communion, our Lord's meal, together here?

Invite participants to listen to the Spirit. Say the following in your own words:

What is the Holy Spirit saying to you? We'll have a time of reflection to take notice of what we have done today. How has this experience been Holy to you? How has this been a beloved community to you today? What did you like or not like about this experience? Where did you feel God? See God? Hear God? (*Have an open group discussion on these questions or others you would like to reflect upon. If group participants do not know one another well, have them discuss in pairs first, then share with the larger group some of their conversation.*)

Share in a closing prayer together. One way to do this would be to invite everyone to hold hands and pray one after the other. As leader, you begin the prayer, then squeeze the hand of the woman on your left. When she feels the squeeze, she begins offering her own prayer aloud. She squeezes the hand of the person next to her, who may then pray in turn, and so forth. If a person chooses not to pray aloud, she may simply pass the squeeze on to the next person. When the squeeze comes back to you as leader, close the time of prayer

If you have more time:



- Optional Activity 1: Love heals. Invite all participants to paint hearts using finger paints and their hands, or crayons, on newsprint. They may include words of scripture or prayers around the theme Beloved Community. Hang the newsprint to decorate your meeting space or another public meeting area of the church.

- Optional Activity 2: Have a hymn sing! Provide hymnals and invite participants to choose their favorite hymns. Are there hymns you could sing together on the theme Beloved Community?
- Optional Activity 3: Spend an extended time in prayer. Find other methods of prayer that you could introduce to the group, such as praying the Psalms, coloring prayers, or a labyrinth. After the time of prayer, invite participants to share their experiences and any special words they feel they received from God.

For further Study:

1. Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God in all the Wrong People*. New York, 2015
2. Jones, Jeffrey. *We Are Baptists: Studies for Adults*. Judson Press. Valley Forge, 2001
3. Jones, Mark. *Criminals of the Bible*. Faith Walk. Michigan, 2006.
4. Moltmann-Wendel, Elisabeth. *Rediscover Friendship*. Fortress Press. Minneapolis, 2001

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