

"My Family"
Sermon: August 12, 2017
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Genesis 37: 1 – 4; 12 – 28

Today's reading from Genesis lays the groundwork for one of the greatest serial installment stories [mini series] of all times, the end of which sees a grand family reunion that eventually culminates in the death of Joseph at the end of Genesis. Spoiler: Joseph and his brothers eventually reconcile.

But today we are not there. Today we are dealing with a dysfunctional family – one that is *"not operating normally or properly."* We wouldn't have soap operas or movie plots without dysfunctional families. Words relating to envy, conspiracy, conflict, sibling rivalry, deception, lust, despair, recovery, justice, reconciliation all come to mind.

You may be able to use some of those words in depicting your own family. I can. But the stories on Netflix, and cable TV have nothing over the story of the family of the 12 sons of Joseph.

If you read the entire 37th chapter of Genesis, including the dream passage, no one really looks good by the end – not Jacob, not Joseph, and especially not the firstborn Reuben, nor the ancestor of Jesus – Judah.

JACOB:

- Unwise handling of son Joseph
- Lavishing of gifts upon him and
- Using him as a Spy

BROTHERS:

- Hateful and murderous thoughts
- Arrogance of Joseph
- Non-reconciliatory behavior from Reuben,
- The Greed of Judah

There are many parts to the dysfunction of this family. The father shows favoritism. He loved Joseph more than any of his sons, because Joseph was the son of Jacob's old age and also was born of Joseph's beloved wife Rachel.

Jacob made him a special robe for Joseph. Preacher Willie Willimon said, *“Now the father Jacob bought most of his family’s clothes at K-Mart – smart thing for a man with 12 sons. But when old Jacob shopped for clothes for Joseph he went to The Man’s Store: Neiman-Marcus.”*

The brothers did not like the fact that Joseph was treated differently than they were. This robe, whatever its meaning, was a constant irritant to them. [You might know some older children who have “opinions” about the possessions of their younger siblings on occasion.]

The brothers perceived that their father did not love them and in a family that perception is often a recipe for a disaster.

Joseph could have been nicknamed the “Bratty Boy.” He was sent out to check on his brothers while they tended flock; maybe the father didn’t trust them. Perhaps they weren’t taking good care of the sheep. BUT, the young Joseph was sent to check on them. Here was the little brother reporting back to the parent about the wrong actions of the brothers.

What might you call that - being a “*Tattletale?*” Besides being his father’s favorite, this action built the negativity in the family drama. Although we didn’t read the dream passage in the middle of Chapter 37 we are told that when Joseph was seventeen years old he had two dreams. In one he interpreted to his brothers that one day he would “rule” over them. They responded, *“Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?”*

Since they were already hurt and angry this added fuel to the fire and they plotted Joseph’s demise. [*Incidentally, Joseph could have just talked with his father about the dreams and asked for guidance, but...*”]

As in all good soap operas Joseph chose to parade the dreams before his brothers. The way he shared them showed bad judgment and possible “brattiness” believing that he was more deserving of their father’s love than they were.

The brothers were bitter. The major part of their anger towards Joseph was undeserved. He would eventually rule over them but they didn’t dare think that their “bratty” little brother might become God’s agent for their GOOD.

They conspired to kill him. But, because of the objections of brother Reuben, they tossed him into a pit. As they casually ate their lunch they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites on camels coming from Gilead carrying their goods and the brothers seized the opportunity to sell their brother for 20 shekels of silver. Later they conspired to return Joseph’s coat dipped in goat blood so that their father would think a wild animal had killed him.

Poor Joseph did believe them and put on sackcloth and mourned and wept for his son refusing to be comforted.

There are more twists and turns in this story – many “what if’s” that could have determined a different outcome. The book of James asks, *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this that your passions are at war within you? You desire and do not have, so you murder.”*

The stem of dysfunction in Joseph’s family was the desire for power. The brothers’ fear that Joseph would rule over them led to a decision to kill him, not only breaking God’s moral law but rejecting God as well. The reason they did not kill him was because they saw an opportunity for gain. They never said, *“After all, he IS our brother.”*

I don’t know if you noticed that In this entire story there was been no mention of God although God’s sovereignty is everywhere. God is working behind the scenes.

What if:

Joseph couldn’t find his brothers tending the sheep that afternoon?

The caravan had been an hour late?

The brothers had ignored Joseph’s dream boasting and just blew it off and remained calm?

Judah wasn’t so greedy for the caravan’s wealth?

Reuben had showed leadership and saved his brother?

Each brother chose their own action and yet God in God’s ultimate mercy and grace used those decisions for good purposes. God used Joseph as an instrument in God’s plan of love and provision. It was because of Joseph’s success in Egypt, in a position of power, that he was able to help his entire family during the famine. It was the kind of help that transcends knowledge or understanding but is contained in love and forgiveness and mercy.

God’s help came through human hands, human love, and human forgiveness and Joseph was able to overcome the human tendency to judge or reject those who had harmed him. God’s grace overcame fear.

Our world is inundated by fear right now. It controls our minds and hearts. Fear is the predominate obstacle to our own ability to have faith and trust in God’s providential love in the midst of turmoil and turbulent circumstances.

Fear is seen in the crisis with the desire for power, with global terror, with nuclear threats, with racial and ethnic hatred, with poverty and even with illness in our lives or in the lives of those we love.

Fear is what almost destroyed Joseph's family and yet the providential love of God intervened. There was reconciliation not only between family member to family member but most importantly, between God and God's people.

Joseph's family is your family and my family. And we as the family of God, as brothers and sisters, as we walk this life's journey we are to trust that God is working behind the scenes of our story to bring about good. So Let us use our hands, our voices, and our acts of love and kindness to assist God along the way.

God is good
All the time
All the time
God is good.

AMEN.