

Please first read this week's preaching text even though it is a bit unusual as it has portions of two chapters; Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34 and Genesis 50:15-21.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Be kind and compassionate to one another
Be kind and compassionate to one another;
Forgive each other, forgive each other,
Just as in Christ, God forgave you.

I have no idea where or when Bruce and Carol first learned this children's song but it sure is catchy and memorable. As Bruce shared in today's children's message, it was last year's theme song for our JAM after school program and is from Ephesians 4, verse thirty-two. Occasionally, we may dismiss the value of children's songs as just silly fun but without a doubt in my mind, this one contains a message that is not silly at all but as critical and life giving as ever. In today's preaching text, we have jumped from the story of God's renewal of the promise made to Abraham in Genesis, chapter fifteen, to the lengthy and dramatic story of Joseph and his brothers at the end of the book. What we encounter is what one scholar calls "a timeless story of preferential parental love and sibling rivalry." And of course this makes sense as we hear in the very first verse of the selected reading, "Now Israel [namely, Jacob, the father] loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age." To demonstrate Jacob's love for Joseph, we also hear about this infamous "coat of many colors" or, a "technicolor dreamcoat," or, as our translation puts it, "a long robe with sleeves." Because of the uniqueness of this gift, the original Hebrew is difficult to translate.

In any case, one of my key takeaways from this is that Joseph was different from his brothers. And, I suspect that from the very first moment when Joseph came out of the closet with that coat on, it served to shout this out loudly to his brothers. Its long sleeves stated loudly that the wearer of this coat was not meant for hard labor. Its length and its many colors stated loudly that he was something of a royal figure. Everything about that coat made the brothers feel insulted. Now did Jacob have some sinister intent by presenting this gift to Joseph? Did he want to create this animosity among his sons? I highly doubt it. But it did. Because as we hear "But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him." Now this makes me wonder. What made them so insecure? Did they all believe that their father's love was so limited? And besides, they aren't little children anymore! But I suppose we all know that feeling to some degree or other. Once we feel

slighted, it becomes all too easy to start seeing everything through this lens of unfairness. We start to feel victimized by everything.

But of course, Joseph is no saint in all of this either. He is a dreamer and when he explains one of his dreams to his brothers, it is like putting gasoline on their smoldering fury. 'Hey brothers, guess what I saw last night? We had been collecting sheaves of wheat and binding them in the field when suddenly mine rose up tall and proud and then all of yours gathered around and bowed to mine. Pretty amazing, wouldn't you say?' Here we don't have a singular response, the story just says "his brothers said to him, 'Are you indeed to reign over us?'" This, we might say, is not Joseph at his finest hour. Telling them about this dream makes it hard for us not to sympathize with the brothers — no one likes a braggart and a jerk.

Now in the next verses, which we did not read aloud, Joseph has a second dream and in this one, it sounds as though even his father and his mother along with his brothers are bowing down to Joseph. This paragraph ends with, "So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind." In other words, everyone had fairly quickly gone from outright rejection of what Joseph had to say to jealousy... meaning they feared it might have some truth to it.

We then jump ahead to a scene wherein Joseph is sent out by his father, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me" (v. 14). So we learn from this that Joseph had not gone out to the field to work (he had the long sleeves after all); he had stayed back with his father. Well as soon as the brothers see Joseph approaching, we are told that "they conspired to kill him." Joseph was clearly not like his brothers. And though he was a dreamer and could act like a total jerk, that doesn't mean he deserved to be killed.

Somehow our cultural tendency of late is to justify violence because we *feel* a certain way. We have so much hostility, even hatred toward our neighbor. And that hostility is stoked by fear. When we are in a place of fear, everything becomes distorted. It brings out the worst in us. Our brain's higher functioning gets turned off as it is forced to take a back seat to what is frequently called our reptilian brain — leaving us capable of only fight or flight. In reality, the brothers had nothing to fear from the approach of the unarmed Joseph but they allowed their hatred and jealousy to stoke fears. "They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits.'" It seems staggering to think that one unarmed young man could possibly pose such a threat to eleven grown men. But the name calling is significant here — while being a dreamer could be something to be celebrated, here it is clearly meant to dehumanize him.

What were they so afraid of? I think it had to be that Joseph's dreams represented a whole new order. And so they came up with fears mostly of their own making. Such as, maybe Joseph was going to take all of Daddy's affections away from them — they would be unloved. Or maybe just as profound, Joseph by his very presence was a threat to their privilege — they would no longer be on top and able to look down on others as somehow less than them. These brothers do not seem to be the blood-thirsty type but they let their emotions command their actions. Something that can never be used to justify such awful behavior toward one's brother nor towards one's neighbor.

Well, the next portion of our story I believe is pretty familiar to most of us. We learn that fortunately, the brothers back away from the worst of their planned action, which was to murder Joseph. But for the most part, it seems that they only did so because of another fear that took hold of them. Both Reuben's planned rescue and Judah's hesitation to just leave Joseph in a pit expresses fear that their brother's blood would cry out to them and haunt them. In the end, we can see how both brothers' good intentions weren't enough — they too completely lose their moral compass. And instead, with what seems to continue their "mob mentality," the brothers somehow decide that the brutal act of selling their brother into slavery and carrying out a completely horrible deception on their father was somehow going to haunt them less.

And with that, we go the other bookend to this story, to the end in chapter fifty. You likely know well that Joseph had indeed risen to a position of tremendous authority and had been exercising that authority judiciously for many years as the Governor of Egypt, he is essentially the right hand of Pharaoh. This scene, I feel, begins in a very sad and poignant way. "Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, 'What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?'" Do you see why this is so tragic? The brothers are still acting out of fear! They do not yet understand mercy and forgiveness! And just as tragically, they do not demonstrate faith — that in spite of all they did, that God has always been with them. So with what they must believe is their only hope, they come up with this fake report that their father Jacob had ordered Joseph to forgive them. They still are conniving, they are still attempting to act as though they have some power to exert over Joseph.

But at this, Joseph is done. He is so done with their games. He responds in the only and best way he knows how. He begins to weep. Joseph's weeping cuts through all of the BS and we hear, "Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, 'We are here as your slaves.'" It is a fulfillment of the dreams that Joseph had so many years previous. Yet Joseph is so different from them and always has been, but they could never accept it. So what happens next is beyond their wildest imagining. Joseph says to them, "Do not be afraid!" Can you finally, by the grace of God, get out of your lizard-brain

mentality? “Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear.” And then I hear what I find to be a wonderfully hopeful message, “I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” I like to think that part of what Joseph provided for them from that time forward was a new order and a new teaching:

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Forgive each other, forgive each other,
Just as in Love, God forgave you. Amen

Narrative.3 Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34 and 50:15-21
September 27, 2020
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