

**Jon Hauerwas – February 24, 2019 – “Sibling Rivalry”
Luke 6:27-38 and Genesis 45:3-11, 15**

I once heard a story about a pastor who sent an intentionally snarky email to some of his clergy friends. In closing, he sarcastically wrote “Your Lord and Savior” before signing his name. His friends knew that he was joking. They rolled their eyes and moved on. But the minister did the very thing that we all fear most when communicating by email. He sent it to the wrong group, and in addition to his intended audience, every minister in the presbytery received his snarky comments.

To make matters worse, the sender was the Senior Pastor of the largest church in the region. As we all know, perceptions and optics matter, and his momentary lapse in judgment ruffled more than a few feathers. The common refrain went something like this: “Who does he think he is, anyway? This arrogant, big church pastor!”

In Genesis we learn about Joseph, one of twelve brothers who, as a boy, also had a way of turning would-be allies into enemies. Granted, some of his problems were not of his own making. For instance, the boys’ father, Jacob, played favorites and personally gifted a beautiful robe only to Joseph. It was of greater value and

significance than anything the others had received. And, understandably, they were jealous.

But, Joseph was also lacking in tact. And things went from bad to worse when he told his brothers about his dreams. Today, most of us try not to psychoanalyze every plot line that emerges during our resting hours. But in the ancient world, dreams were very important. ¹

And the more that Joseph dreamed, the more he had to share and to boast about. This was particularly true when those visions proclaimed a triumphant future in which Joseph would serve as a lord and his brothers would bow down to him. Joseph's brothers, disgusted and dismayed, plotted to sell him into slavery. And, once they succeeded, believed that they had rid themselves of their father's favorite son – this dreamer. ²

We learn that, in Egypt, Joseph matures and becomes the model of an administrator. “He is pictured as modest, hard-working, honest, wise, and devoted to his superior. All of these qualities contribute to his rapid rise.” ³ He has the ear of

¹ Ed. George Arthur Buttrick, *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia, Volume 2*, (Abingdon Press: 2000), 982.

² Ed. Joel B. Green, *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship, Year C, Volume 1*, (Westminster John Knox Press: 2018), 255.

³ *Ibid.*, 983 – 984.

the Pharaoh, and when earnestly suggests that the king “select a man discreet and wise” as his top advisor, the Pharaoh has a ready response. “There is none so discreet and wise as you are.”⁴ Joseph, the one who once dreamed of being a ruler is now Pharaoh’s chief advisor – a “‘ruler-lord-father,’ not just over the family, but over the empire. All of this, we learn, is the work of God. No one could stop it. And no one else can be credited with it.”⁵

Joseph’s predictive powers shine brightly. A famine disrupts life in Egypt, just as he had warned. More broadly, the same phenomena brings devastation for Jacob and his sons back in Israel. Now, the same brothers who once handed Joseph over must travel to the mighty kingdom to their south in order to buy food. There they encounter Joseph who recognizes them even if they cannot say the same, and “they bow to him, exactly as the dreams predicted so long ago.”⁶

Soon, Joseph reveals his identity. His brothers are filled with terror and astonishment, much like the early church following the disclosure of the living Jesus (Mark 16:8). “The family is suddenly set in a new context. Their presumed world

⁴ *Ibid.*, 984.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 346.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 256.

has been irreversibly shattered.”⁷ The brothers are now at the mercy of Joseph, and they fear that he will “exploit and act out the past.” They understand that their lives are now in danger, and they anticipate the wrath of their brother-turned-ruler.⁸ And, then, the plot twists. Rather than leaning into that past estrangement, Joseph chooses, instead, “to break with that past. He invites his brothers to put that past behind them, and he opens to them another future.”⁹

Walter Brueggemann writes that “in our time, where conflicts have raged so deeply, so long, in Northern Ireland, in Palestine, and in South Africa, we find it hard to believe in the possibility of newness. The future seems only a replay of the past.” Here, the Joseph “narrative makes a tenacious counter-affirmation.”¹⁰ And here, “the power to create newness does not come from detachment, but from risky, self-disclosing engagement.”¹¹

To this, Stacey Duke adds, “Is there any emotional pain more common or more complicated than family pain? We think of family as the people who are supposed to love us, keep us safe, and accept us, just as we are. Joseph’s brothers

⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Ed. James Luther Mays (Westminster John Knox Press: 2010), 344.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 344.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 347.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 345.

hated him instead of loving him, and caused him harm instead of keeping him safe. The dysfunction in Joseph's family runs back generations, as we see in the many stories of dishonesty, manipulation, sibling rivalry, and other bad behavior.”¹²

And now, repeatedly, “we are told of Joseph's weeping” as he asks his brother's an emotionally-charged question: “‘Is my father still alive?’ All these years, father and son have been dead to each other. For Jacob, the grief was certain. He believed Joseph had ‘without doubt’ been torn to pieces (Gen. 37:33). For Joseph, the grief of separation was compounded by uncertainty; he did not even know if his father was still alive.”¹³

Surprisingly, Jacob is alive. Surprisingly, father and son will be reunited. And, surprisingly, Joseph finds a way to forgive even the brothers who delivered him into slavery. The message here is very clear. “Even within a family system loaded with manipulation, jealousy, and fear, a single person within the system has the power to transform relationships, and even the system itself, through an unexpected act of reconciliation.”¹⁴

¹² *Ibid.*, 258.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 258.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 258.

Family betrayal is often the most painful, making forgiveness under these circumstances even more challenging. It all makes me wonder how we might respond if the tables had turned and we were the ones with power and opportunity to exact revenge. Joseph is wise. He forgives. And he demonstrates that “reconciliation *can* happen. Even within families.”¹⁵

May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 256 – 257.