

Sunday June 6, 2021
 Lesson 1: Sibling Rivalry Writ Large
 Scripture: Genesis 37: 5-28

Context:

This week we begin a new series for the summer entitled: Respond. The focus of the series will be on what we receive from God and how God can intend things for good. Today's lesson comes from the Old Testament in the book of Genesis. For the next several weeks, we will be diving into the Joseph narrative.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is one of conflict, love, betrayal, and forgiveness. We get hints of the brewing conflict in the early part of chapter thirty-seven with the family of Jacob named including the sons of Leah and Rachel. When Jacob's favored wife Rachel produces a son, Joseph, the preferential love of wife is passed on to the son as well. He gives Joseph a particular coat, evoking the jealousy of the brothers. Even before we get to the interaction of the characters, the scene is set for conflict.

Joseph and his brothers will become a part of a narrative where there is a build of conflict, and then a release. The three scenes in today's narrative move from tension (verses 5-11), through violence (verses 18-31), and, finally to grief (verses 32-35).¹ Joseph begins the narrative by telling his brothers of a dream he was given followed by another dream. Both dreams contained things bowing down to him, first the stalks of wheat and then the stars, sun, and moon; all allusions connecting to the number within his family. The family hears of the dreams and scoffs, but Jacob keeps note of what is taking place.

When Jacob sends Joseph to check on his brothers tending their flocks, he is taken out to an empty field. A lone man reveals to him his brothers are not there; instead they are in Dothan. Yet when his brothers see him approach, they mock him as the great dreamer. They plot to kill him and Reuben interferes with something different. Reuben seeks to save him not to be a hero, but instead to be a responsible coward killing the dream so they may continue to live.² After stripping Joseph of his robe and throwing him into the cistern, the plot thickens. Judah, another responsible coward, suggest they sell him into slavery and thus Joseph makes his way to Egypt as part of a slave caravan.

The brothers proceed forward to collect the money they receive in selling their brother and begin to return home. Reuben is absent in the sale of the boy and laments when he discovers Joseph is gone. Yet he confers with his brothers, and they know they are trapped with a narrative they need to present to their father. Pulling from Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*, as with Macbeth, the blood will not be covered and as with Lady Macbeth, the guilt will not vanish.³ They pour goat's blood on the coat and return to their father with the lie of how their brother is dead. The narrative ends in grief with

¹ Walter Brueggemann, "Genesis," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2010), 300.

² *Ibid.*, 304.

³ *Ibid.*

Jacob crying over this beloved son he believes to be lost forever.

Application

Today's lesson ends in grief. The first part of the Joseph narrative is anything but nice or pleasant to read. As we read, we may find our own stories in this scripture as we remember the times we have experienced betrayal, conflict, or abandonment. God often speaks to us in these narratives in ways to help us process the pain and the grief we feel.

No one in today's lesson comes out looking well. Joseph seemed to struggle with self-awareness as he told his brothers of the dreams. As innocent as he may have been in telling them, the brothers could care less and were incensed.

The brothers were also complicit, willing to play the role of judge and executioner, and then coming out as Lady Macbeth, their hands dripping with blood. Reuben and Judah became the "responsible cowards," those who wanted to somehow retain their virtue as they sought to destroy their brother. Lest we forget, they had a choice as elder brothers in this narrative and made the decision to go after him.

And then there is Jacob, or Israel, as he named in this text. He saw the conflict brewing and kept his cards close to his chest. Yet he also sent Joseph out on his own, knowing that it would be his brothers against Joseph, especially if they were up to no good. Yet the tale ends with him as just as much a victim as Joseph, bereft of the child he loved so dearly.

Where is God in this part of the narrative of the Joseph story? We often want to jump to the end, where we read the verse "God meant it for good" and everything is squared away in a nice, neat little box. Yet can we really do justice to exploring the text if we go to the ending without going through the pain and heartache? The story of Joseph and his brothers in this narrative invite us to explore in our lives where conflict and tension may have caused wounds and led all of us to be disconnected from God and one another.

As recipients of God's grace, we all receive something we did not deserve or earn. We are given a precious gift, something to give us life and a reminder of God's unrelenting love and mercy towards us. We are given hope for a different life and a mission to go forth and be God's servants in this world. It does not mean we will not sin or fall short. What it does mean is that God has claimed us as God's own and God's grace will be sufficient.

Yet the narrative also invites us to consider how we live beside one another. In this case, Joseph's brothers, whatever Joseph might have done or said, acting in a way that was harmful. They were so blinded by their own desires and need for power, they sacrificed their brother and a part of themselves, only to bring pain and hurt into the world. They did not give the same grace God had given to them to their brother, and as a result, there was confusion, violence, and pain.

While today we are reminded of the good news of the grace of Jesus Christ given to us, we are also reminded we are sinners. We have hurt others and even when we don't directly hurt someone as Reuben and Judah might suggest, our silence hurts others. Today we are reminded that we all need grace for those we hurt, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We should mourn how we have forgotten to live and love one another.

Today's narrative reminds us God has given all of us grace and we all need it.

And God also calls for us to watch our words and our actions, to remember that love is greater than hate. As we will see in our narrative with Joseph, the Lord is always at work to redeem and restore us.

How have you seen a conflict escalate where someone is hurt or sacrificed for the “good of the whole?” What do you think drives us to hurt others in words and in actions? How have you felt God’s grace in your life when you’ve erred or hurt someone else? How can we learn to love others in conflict?

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