

Jealous Dreams
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
September 27, 2020

Genesis 37:3-8, 17-22, 26-34; 50:15-21

This morning we have the story of Joseph: a full-of-himself younger brother, and his ten jealous and angry older brothers.

Add in a little betrayal, famine, political intrigue, parental favoritism and a kidnapping! The ratings on this Jerry Springer episode would be epic!

Now back in those days the oldest son was always the favored child, standing to inherit all the father's wealth and status. But not in this family. We learn that in this family, the father, Jacob, loved Joseph the most – he was the son of his old age, born from the favorite of four wives.

He showed his preference in many ways. The most obvious was the gift he gave... an expensive coat, the kind with long sleeves that every middle eastern young man dreamed to have.

Which causes, among his older brothers, a jealousy that turns to hatred, that turns to rage.

At seventeen, Joseph had some dreams that one day the entire world, including his brothers, would bow down at his feet. And he was just dumb or arrogant enough to tell his brothers about those dreams, which is sort of like pouring lighter fluid on a smoldering campfire: it only inflamed their hatred.

The growing animosity compelled them to kidnap him, fake his death and sell him into slavery, which is how Joseph became a servant to an important official in Egypt. They rip up the coat, cover it in animal blood and bring it to their despondent father.

And for almost 40 years, their father Jacob feels the pain of that loss.

And for almost 40 years, Joseph couldn't feel his father's love... because of what his brothers chose to do to him.

Do you know what I'd be doing in his place? Nursing my grudge. Fantasizing about how to get back at them. But not Joseph! He kept focusing forward. Eventually, he is released from his captivity and through some miraculous circumstances becomes the Pharaoh's most trusted official.

And this is when he performs his greatest feat. Guided by God, Joseph had the foresight to stockpile massive amounts of grain during seven years of abundant harvest. What follows is seven years of famine during which Egypt is prepared to feed the world, growing wealthier in the process.

It was during that time that Joseph's starving brothers went to Egypt seeking food.

His brothers didn't recognize him as they bowed and begged before him, but Joseph recognized them. If revenge is sweet, then he was standing in the doorway of a candy store! With just a word he could have had all of them imprisoned, or sold into slavery, or even tortured and executed! It was in his power to do so. But he didn't.

Joseph didn't pick at his emotional scab, he let that pain fade away years ago. He wasn't focused on what evil had been done to him; instead he was focused on the good that God had done through him. He learns from his brothers that his father is still alive and although their time together will be short, there is a chance to make up for what had been lost. The possibility to be reunited fills his eyes with tender tears.

"Dad said you should forgive us!" The brothers cower in fear. Joseph responds... "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good..."¹

Now, replace that word "intended" with the word "weaved", because that's the meaning of the word in Hebrew. In effect, Joseph was saying to his brothers, "I know that you were trying to weave a thread of pain into my life, but that's OK, because God took that thread and wove it into my life and made something beautiful with it. God used it for good." He's willing to overlook the past and move on.

Have you ever looked at the back side of a tapestry? It's usually a mess of threads and knots with very little discernable pattern. But when you turn it over and look at the front, all you see is beauty and order. And I think that is one of the things this story is trying to teach us.

Throughout life, we have choices. Things happen for reasons we can't fully understand at the time. We can focus on what people and circumstances beyond our control have done to us and choose to focus on the pain. But that's like looking at the back of a tapestry, all we see is ugly, which can make us feel bitter and disillusioned.

¹ Genesis 50:20

Or we can choose to focus on what God is doing now. Make no mistake, the things that happen in this story are AWFUL. Suffering happened; it was real. We can choose to look for the way God takes the threads of our pain and disfunction and weaves it into our story to eventually make something we might call beautiful.

Again and again, the story repeats the refrain "God was with Joseph". I'm certain that there were moments when Joseph struggled to believe something good would come from his situation. He wasn't left hopeless, abandoned and despondent.

That doesn't mean that God causes our challenges in order to test us. You can believe that if you want, but I don't. I choose to hold on to the hope that no matter how dark and tangled the threads of our lives have become, love can find a way to weave something beautiful. God can find a way to bring something good out the other side, if we choose to trust the promise.

Can you imagine choosing to love your worst enemies in such a way that it actually brings them life? Joseph showed love for his brothers in such a way that it brought life to them and their children; despite the fact they had sold him into human trafficking as a slave. In the end, Joseph and his alienated brothers are able to forgive and reconcile. What was torn apart by jealousy and anger and a scarcity mindset was repaired with forgiveness. And while nothing could change what had happened, the ability to forgive was what changed the outcome.

We live in a world where divisiveness is almost always either in our face or just around the corner. Social media posts and family discussions can turn ugly with just one bad sentence. And so there are so many things happening to us all at once – elections, political rancor, the pandemic, the recession – all are pounding away at each one of us.

Add to it our own personal problems and relationships and it can be a lot to bear. Is it any wonder that all too often we find ourselves at odds with people we work with, live near and even the ones we love?

Love, unevenly applied, can lead to some disastrous outcomes. Giving in to a sense of scarcity, whether it's something like grain or a father's love, can create divisions between people who would otherwise get along. We can't change the past, but with forgiveness, we have a chance to change the future. Forgiveness is the first step in freeing ourselves from the pain inflicted by someone else. Each one of us has to make peace with our own journey, but the path ahead can be quite different when we let grace lead us down the road. Amen.