

Sometimes Your World Is Falling Apart: From Evil to Good
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer M. Gingras
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Genesis 50:15-21

Sometime over the summer I got a bug bite on my left elbow. Not a big deal, but it made me itch, so I scratched it. After a few days, the itching subsided and a scab formed. Without even thinking about it I found myself digging around the edges of the wound.

Now, this may fall into the category of “too much information”, and for that I apologize. About 10 days ago I noticed that my elbow was hot to the touch, red and sore, so I went to see my nurse practitioner and she told me that I had a staph infection and put me on antibiotics. My point is, it took a few days of pain and an \$80 co-pay for me to learn to leave it alone and let it heal. Seems ridiculous, doesn't it? And yet many of us do it regularly.

Not only do we pick at physical wounds but, emotional ones too. Someone says or does something that hurts us and rather than letting it go we pick at it. We replay the words over in our heads, sometimes changing the conversation to increase our outrage (or victimhood). We might even tell our story to a friend to elicit their sympathy and support.

As we continue our journey through Genesis we meet someone who deals with his wounds in a very different way. His name is Joseph and just in case you don't remember, I'll fill in a little bit of his backstory.

It all began with a dysfunctional family (at least that's what we would call it today). Joseph had 10 older brothers, and back in those days the oldest was always the favored child, but not in this family. His father, Jacob, loved him the most and showed it by giving him an expensive, colorful coat.

You can only imagine how well this favoritism went over with his brothers. The story puts it this way: “... *when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.*¹”

Later, at seventeen, Joseph had some dreams that suggested that one day the entire world, including his brothers, would bow down at his feet. And he was dumb enough to tell his brothers about those dreams, which is sort of

¹ Genesis 37:4

like pouring lighter fluid on a smoldering campfire: it only inflamed their hatred.

The 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. Which sounds like a raw deal, but we're told: "*The LORD was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master.*"²

Just because the Lord is with you doesn't necessarily mean life will be easy. Shortly after, he wound up falsely accused and imprisoned.

Do you know what I'd be doing here? I'd probably be nursing my anger toward all those who hurt me. But not Joseph. He kept focusing forward and meditating on God. Eventually, he is released 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 hadn't been picking at his 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. Today's reading captured his response "*Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good...*"³

Now, replace that word "intended" and with the word "weaved", because that's the meaning of the word in Hebrew. 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.*"

² Genesis 39:2

³ Genesis 50:20

To be honest, I'm not there yet, with some of the people who have caused me pain over the years. I'd like to be.

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's one of the things this story is trying to teach us.

Throughout life, we have a choice. We can focus on what people and circumstances beyond our control have done to us. We can 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.

Or we can focus, not on what others have done but on what God is doing now. We can look for the way God takes the threads of our pain and weaves it into our story to make something beautiful.

In every difficult situation this 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. But he wasn't left hopeless, abandoned and despondent.

In the end, Joseph wasn't bitter; he was better. And he could look at the ones who hurt him most with love in his eyes. Maybe that's what the Apostle Paul meant in his letter to the Romans when he said "*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*"⁴

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 do hold out 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.

During the Holocaust, in a time when the world seemed to be in the grip of evil, there were people who were able to make something good out of an otherwise terrible situation. There was a point when they decided to act, a boundary they were not willing to cross, an evil they could no longer ignore. Today, they are called "the Righteous Among the Nations", and their stories are chronicled at Yad Vashem, a research center and museum in Jerusalem.⁵

⁴ Romans 8:28

⁵ <http://www.yadvashem.org/yv/en/righteous/about.asp>

Sofia Kritikou was a housecleaner and single mother who lived with her only daughter outside Athens when the persecution of Jews by the German Occupiers began.

One day, the grandmother and elderly aunts of a neighbor's family went to the synagogue and never came back. They were there because of a rumor that rations for food would be distributed, and were instead deported to Auschwitz. After their disappearance, the father, David, took his three children, 18-year-old son Tsvi, 16-year-old Liana, and eight-year-old Jeny, into hiding. He knew the Nazi's would return.

At first they found temporary shelter with friends and acquaintances. But constantly moving around was hard on the children, and he wanted a more permanent solution. A co-worker mentioned Sophia's name as someone who might help.

In spite of her poverty, Sophia did not hesitate to open her home. At first, she did not know that the family under her roof was Jewish. When she discovered their true identity, she didn't kick them out, despite the threat of arrest and death for anyone found sheltering Jews.

The family found shelter with Sophia and her daughter until the end of the war. When it was all over, the father and eldest daughter remained in Greece, while Tsvi and the youngest daughter immigrated to Israel.

A few years later, Tsvi returned to Athens to visit his rescuer, Sophia. During the trip, he fell in love with her daughter Agapi. She returned his affection, converted from Orthodox Christianity to Judaism and changed her name to Ruth. The couple then married and moved to Israel. Sophia came to live with them until she passed away in 1995, at the ripe old age of 100

They could have made different choices. Sophia could have shut her doors and refused the family needing shelter, which would have protected her from scarcity and wartime violence. Tsvi could have decided to never return, given the brutality of what he had seen. But instead, they centered themselves on moving forward, which opened them to the good that love can do.

Now, their example is a difficult one to emulate and we pray that kind of evil never gains strength again. But some of us have suffered great pain at the hands of another, or perhaps we will in the future. Taking our revenge may feel good in the moment, but does it help us in the long run? Those scabs are ugly, and they hurt. Better to set our eyes on the horizon, and focus on the good that God is still doing in the world, where love still grows. Amen.