

I grew up with a friend who was an only child. There may be some only children who see a number of upsides to their situation, but she was instead envious of those with siblings. This friend, therefore, upon growing up and getting married, chose to have numerous children, to create that big, happy community of a family that she felt she missed out on growing up. Only to discover, it doesn't always work out quite the way we imagine! In that larger family she created, conflict was as frequent an experience as was family warmth and fun, and now in adulthood, her children continue to be contentious among themselves, some of them not speaking to one another and so forth---far from the big happy family she envisioned. As she discovered, and as most of us know, the plain and honest truth is that families are complicated; familial harmony is much harder to achieve than we might think. This is a timeless truth, reflective of the realities of our human nature. One of the places we, as people of faith, see this truth played out time and again is in Holy Scripture. In fact, much of the history we see within the Bible centers around dysfunctional families that morph into warring tribes and nations. As Lutherans, we will talk about how we are both saint and sinner. Perhaps because families are where we are most often in close and prolonged contact with other humans, they become the arena where both our saintliness and our sinfulness is played out most clearly. Parents and children; siblings; things can get pretty intense. Take our story from Genesis 45 this morning, for example, which exemplifies both the worst and best of people within families, the story of Joseph and his brothers.

We may want to back up just a moment though, to understand how this particular dramatic scene which we have before us came about. Let's go back to Joseph's great-great grandfather, who was Abraham, the first patriarch of the Old Testament. Abraham fathered two sons, one by his wife, Sarah, and one by her servant, Hagar. Not surprisingly, Sarah and Hagar and the son each one bore, became rivals for Abraham's favor. A sense of competition and hostility pervaded this family from the get-go, and it's painfully clear how this family dysfunction continues down through generations. Abraham's son by Sarah, Isaac, marries Rebekkah, and they have a set of twins: Jacob and Esau. Esau is Isaac's favorite, and Jacob is Rebekkah's favorite. The two brothers are jealous rivals of one another, and Jacob cheats Esau out of his birthright and flees for his life.

Jacob then has 12 sons from his two wives, and these 12 sons do not get along at all. One reason for this is that Jacob favors the youngest son, Joseph, repeating the destructive pattern of his own father's favoritism for his brother. Joseph enjoys being the favorite and lords it over his older brothers whenever possible. The final straw is when Jacob gives Joseph a wonderful coat of many colors—made famous by the musical, “Joseph and his Amazing, Technicolor Dreamcoat”. Joseph was a dreamer. In many of his dreams, his older brothers bowed down to him and served him, and when he gloated about that to them, they liked him even less. He was probably about 17 when his jealous, fed-up older brothers at last found a way to get rid of him, selling him into slavery and faking his death for their father. I mean, what a family! And isn't it both interesting and *significant* that there had been bitter sibling relationships in each successive generation of this family, a kind of generational trauma that kept getting played out again in the *next* generation? We sometimes see the same kind of generational trauma and brokenness within *our own* family systems, whether from alcohol abuse, physical violence, abandonment, or simply jealousies and rivalries that don't quit, and it grieves us. The dysfunction can seem all-encompassing and overwhelming, and we feel helpless in the face of it.

But, what of Joseph, now serving as a slave in the household of the Egyptian pharaoh? Sadly, there's not enough time to go into details, but Joseph continues to have a drama-filled life. When he rejects the advances of his master's wife, she accuses him of rape and has him thrown into prison. But while in prison, he gains a reputation as an interpreter of dreams, and this skill eventually brings him before the Pharaoh himself. Pharaoh, it seems, was troubled by dreams that Joseph successfully interpreted to mean that Egypt was going to experience a severe drought and famine. This famine is then averted because Pharaoh believes Joseph and stockpiles grain prior to the drought. Because of this stockpiling, countless lives are saved when the drought occurs. Which is where the action in the chapter we have before us this morning happens.

Due to Joseph's presence and ingenuity, Egypt prospers during the time of famine. Which means folks from all over that region must come and purchase grain from them. Among those who come, in an amazing example of karma, are Joseph's brothers from back in Canaan. Times are hard back in Canaan, and they wish to purchase grain from Egypt and bring it back to feed the family. When the brothers come before Joseph to

buy the grain, they don't recognize him; why would they? It's been decades, and from their perspective, he could be serving as a slave anywhere in Egypt or be quite likely dead from the hardships of slavery; they certainly wouldn't expect to find him amongst Egyptian royalty, second only to the Pharaoh in power. *They* don't recognize *him*, but *he does recognize them*.

Obviously this sets us up for a suspenseful moment of wondering how Joseph will now react. Is he the same swaggering, arrogant young man who helped foster the resentment of his brothers all those years back? Or has he, through his hardships, grown in faith and maturity into a better version of himself? After a bit of initial delay on Joseph's part, in our lesson this morning, he is ready to come clean with his brothers. And let's think for a moment about these brothers. They have lived with an enormous lie for decades, having told their father that Joseph was killed by wild animals, when they know full well they sold him into slavery. What kind of corrosive impact has that secret and guilt had upon them? And what of that grieving father, living all these years under a brutal misconception about his youngest son's fate? Has this been a happy family back in Canaan? Not by a long shot! Yet perhaps these brothers have also had some time to grow in faith and maturity prior to this stunning moment of revelation.

Joseph reveals his identity, leaving his brothers shocked into silence and probably fear. He goes on to do two very crucial things. First of all, he is a truth-teller. Having honestly identified himself, he goes on to speak truth to his brothers about their past sin—"You sold me into slavery", he says. No white-washing of the truth there. Revisionist histories or denial of past acts is not a good foundation for moving forward. Acknowledging honestly what has happened can be an essential first step to healing. So often, we are tempted to gloss over the past or minimize it, and sometimes that just means we carry a lot of woundedness or anger around inside us. Joseph models truth telling here. But then he goes farther and forgives his brothers. His faith in God enables him to allow for healing and reconciliation in this hugely dysfunctional family to start to happen. I want us to think about forgiveness for a moment. It's not nearly as simple or one-dimensional as we might make it out to be. Forgiveness is likely both a continuum and a process that happens over time. We never perfectly forgive. And some situations might allow for some forgiveness to happen, but not for actual

reconciliation to occur. Complete forgiveness or actual reconciliation are not always possible or even desirable. It's important that we acknowledge that. And yet, in instances where healing can happen, as in this story, truth telling and forgiveness are significant steps along that path towards reconciliation. Having forgiven these brothers, Joseph assures the survival of his family, and through them, the survival of the Hebrew people. He does this by inviting all of them to come to Egypt and escape starvation. He includes everyone in that invitation from the patriarch, his Father Jacob, to the brothers, and on down to the children and grand-children of his brothers; thus four generations are involved. Which suggests that by his act of forgiveness and reconciliation, Joseph will reverse the generational trauma and model a different way of relating as a family, all the way to that youngest generation. Joseph looks to break the cycle of rivalry, violence, and retribution.

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This theme of forgiveness is fundamental to this story. But there is another theme within this story that also is well worth our notice. It is the theme of providence---of God working behind the scenes to do good. Providence is how God makes a way for possibilities and opportunities that we couldn't imagine on our own. And that's encouraging! "God moves in mysterious ways", we sometimes say, and certainly we see that in the story of Joseph. What his brothers intended for harm, for the ridding themselves of this younger brother they couldn't bear, God used for good. Because Joseph was in Egypt at the time of the upcoming famine, he was able to take actions that saved countless lives from starvation. Which demonstrates that even what we do out of malicious intent, God can use to find a way to bring good. That's an amazing God-thing. And then the brothers needing to beg help from the very brother they wronged after so many years is another example of providence; God can work behind the scenes of this natural disaster to bring people together in a way that allows for healing. We might call it karma, we might call it coincidence, we might call it God-incidence, but certainly it is *Providence*---the mysterious and purposeful actions of God, working behind the scenes to provide blessings and bring good, even out of ill-intended acts.

Fast forward briefly to our Gospel lesson and the teachings of Jesus. Jesus, of course, provides the ultimate example of forgoing retribution and instead offering forgiveness and reconciliation to all humanity on God's behalf, in the crucifixion and resurrection. In this Gospel lesson, he asks us to do likewise. He basically asks us to be like Joseph. Or to be like God, as we see God revealed in Christ. He says really hard and crazy things like, "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you." He suggests that if we simply practice pleasant reciprocity in our relationships with other nice people that we like, we are doing nothing Christ-like or exceptional at all. He instead holds up forgiveness, going the extra mile, seeking reconciliation as the way to live as a lover of God. "Be merciful", he tells us, "Just as God is merciful". Which certainly sets the bar beyond our human capacity. Nevertheless, forgiveness, we have noted, is a continuum and a process. Imperfect though our efforts may be, unless and until someone faithful and courageous finds a way to break those cycles of hostility and retribution and estrangement, nothing changes.

As we reflect on and respond to these texts this morning, I wonder if we would do well to cultivate two areas of awareness. Firstly, might we cultivate an awareness of the amazing grace and mercy of God in our own lives? Perhaps that awareness, over time, grows within us that capacity to be generous in spirit, to act with mercy and forgiveness. It can help us break free from the chains of hostility and anger. And secondly, might we cultivate an awareness of how God is moving, mysteriously and providentially, behind the scenes, bringing good even out of evil, providing opportunities for forgiveness and reconciliation that we might otherwise miss? So that when those opportunities come, we can recognize and grasp them? We cultivate both of these areas of awareness, knowing that God sets the bar high for us, but *also* trusting that this same Lord finds a way to bring life, healing, and good even out of what seems dead, broken and hopeless to us. *That's what God does.* God moves in mysterious ways to break cycles of sin, violence, and revenge. Even we, led by God's Spirit, can play a part in this mysterious and blessed work of God, breaking the chains of negative cycles to begin the work of forgiving and healing, bearing witness to God's amazing grace. Amen.