

Joseph and His Brothers, Gen 45:3-11, 15 & Ps 37:1-12, 41-42, NM

Beginning

The Genesis story about Joseph and his brothers is surely one of the strangest and most striking in The Bible. A lot of us are familiar with part of the story. The part about a family that had many brothers in it, and the murderous envy that arose among them. It's an archetypal story with overtones of Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob and others - both in literature and in real life.

Cain and Abel were the first sons of Adam and Eve, born to them after they had been expelled from Eden. Cain was the oldest and loved farming, while his little brother Abel was a herder. One day they both brought offerings to God. Cain came with vegetables from his garden, and Abel brought a lamb. As it happened on that particular day, God was in the mood for lamb and he complimented Abel on the quality of his flock, but ignored Cain and his veggies - which made Cain angry as hell. So - still smarting from the slight - Cain took his brother out for a walk and killed him. You can imagine what God thought about that! He sentenced Cain to be estranged from the land he so loved. He became a wanderer who could not die of old age. God also placed a mark on him, so that all would know he was protected and they would not be tempted to kill him and put him out of his misery.

Esau and Jacob were the twin sons of Isaac who was the son of Abraham and Sarah - the first Jews - born to them in their old age in fulfillment of God's Covenant Promise when God had set them wandering. When the twins were born Esau emerged first, but the midwives were astonished to find that Jacob came into the world holding on to Esau's heel - as it turned out, a prophecy of how things would go with them as they reached maturity! As children they got along, but in time they went separate ways. Esau became a man who loved to go hunting and fishing. Jacob loved to stay in camp with the women and in time became the manager of the family homestead. When Isaac was old, near death and blind, he called for Esau - who was his favorite - to attend him. But his wife

favored Jacob and she conspired to disguise Jacob so that his father would think it was his brother. Isaac was well and truly deceived and thinking he was addressing Esau, decreed that the person before him would inherit his entire estate. By the time Esau found out what had happened it was too late to do anything about it - Isaac had given his word. So Esau left the family to make his own way.

As you will see, the tale of Joseph and his brothers contains elements from both of these earlier accounts. Like so much of the OT, these stories are about elemental human relationships. It's easy to see them as over the top renderings of life and death, but the fact is that they reflect reality. Human beings are prone to let emotions and obsessions push them to do some strange things.

Why are sibling relationships so often fraught? What is there in those relationships that so often sparks jealousy and anger? This is fundamental stuff. No matter where you live or what you believe in, you likely have a family! And what happens in that family will have a deep impact on how your life unfolds. We all have this to cope with this, just as we have to cope with our mortality.

Middle

I have a younger brother - three years difference. Our birthdays are only two days apart so it's almost exactly three. I think overall the dynamic was harder on him. It's so hard to always be behind, trying to catch up. Our mother had a hard time when we were young, so it put the burden on me to be a kind of surrogate parent. Which may have something to do with my becoming a minister. I'm a born caretaker. In a lot of things my brother was better than me. He was more sociable and better at sports, so he enjoyed a level of acceptance that I never had as a kid. But later on it led to some painful stuff that sometimes makes our relationship oddly formal - sometimes awkward - sometimes angry. I suspect that everyone who has siblings has something that shapes those relationships and makes them challenging. If not always then some of the time.

Here is the story of Joseph and his brothers, which in a way is part of the story we've been telling, about the same extended family. Jacob -son of Isaac son of Abraham - had two wives and many children but Joseph was the youngest and because he was born when Jacob was already old, he became the favorite. Indeed he was more like a grandson than a son. The more Jacob doted on Joseph, the more his brothers resented him, until the resentment turned into hatred. And to be completely fair, Joseph could be kind of a brat. For one thing he was a tattletale and ran to tell Jacob whenever he saw one of his brothers goofing off or doing something risky.

One day Jacob sent his young son - who was then seventeen years old - to check on his brothers who were out in the fields tending the sheep. As soon as the brothers saw Joseph coming they began to conspire against him. The plan they hit upon was simple. Murder the boy and tell their father they'd been set upon by bandits. They would tell Isaac that they had barely escaped with their lives - but tragically Joseph had been murdered.

Meanwhile, what actually happened was this. They set upon Joseph, bound and gagged him and then started to talk about how best to kill him. But one of them spoke up. He said, *Brothers! We can't do this thing. Joseph may be annoying but he's still our blood. It's wrong to spill it. I think we should sell him to the slavers and tell our father that he was murdered.* It went back and forth for awhile, but in the end, that's what they did.

Joseph came to bouncing around in the back of a strange wagon. In time he was taken to Egypt and sold into slavery to the Captain of the King's Guard. Joseph was smart and enterprising and his life in Egypt took many strange turns, but always because he had God's favor things came out right for him. One day it happened that he heard the King had had a troubling dream that none of his advisors were able to interpret for him. Joseph thought he could help. He had by then a reputation as an interpreter of dreams and his master sponsored him so that he did indeed go before Pharaoh. His interpretations found favor with Pharaoh and he prospered greatly.

Now...one of the things Joseph did was to counsel Pharaoh to store excess grain from good-year crops so that in the bad years there would still be enough. And what do you think? A time came when there was famine throughout the region and no place was there any grain to be found except in Egypt. His father and his brothers heard about it and some of them went to Egypt to buy grain. Because it had been his idea to store surplus grain, Pharaoh had placed Joseph in charge of its sale and distribution. So it was Joseph who was sent to see about the merchants from Palestine. Joseph was shocked to see that they were his own brothers who had sold him into slavery so many years before. He sold them grain and did not take their money which threw them into consternation. The famine was a long one and they had to return twice more. It was during the third journey that Joseph finally revealed himself to them. He said, *Clearly God knew this famine would come and arranged things so that I would be here when it did. I was the advance scout. God wants God's People to live and I have been an instrument. Our people will flourish. I am filled with awe and gratitude.*

There's more to the story. Like how Joseph gained the trust of Pharaoh's officials and how they came to believe in him. Or his marriage and family in Egypt. But I've given you the main parts.

What stands out immediately is that Joseph never seemed to express the kind of anger you'd have expected him to have felt toward his brothers. When they realized who he was they fully expected to be struck down there and then. They figured he'd just been toying with them. But that wasn't it at all. See Joseph was truly touched by the Holy Spirit and he knew that what had happened - as bad as it was - had been no one's fault. Not his father's for favoring him and not his brothers for hating him. It's just how humans are wired.

In a lot of ways Joseph channeled Jesus and it shows us that what Jesus taught us is part of a universal language of faith - and certainly part of the tradition that has come to us through the OT. He understood the same lesson - people will be people. We're not angels. We have emotions and sometimes those emotions run

away with us. Jesus didn't instruct his disciples to forgive enemies because he wanted them to look good. He instructed them in that way because he understood the nature of human beings and he understood that if we do not learn to forgive each other we'll wind up in a hell of our own making.

End

One of the ways we can understand Genesis is as a roadmap to the development of the human family and the human spirit. It also therefore tracks the way every human person grows. It seems to me that there will always be tensions within families because none of us are perfect and therefore every parent will inevitably make mistakes.

It's tempting to think that with the advent of child rearing literature and parenting therapies most kids aren't subjected to situations that lead to the kind of hostility that sent Joseph off to Egypt. Tempting yes but also deeply misguided. I think nearly all of us make an effort to be responsible parents as well as grateful offspring. But human frailty intrudes in at least two ways.

First, those modern theories about how to build a healthy family don't reach everyone and some of the people who are reached don't take the advice to heart. And second, there is something in the human spirit that rebels at the thought of doing things according to plan. Our emotions run away with us and we find ourselves doing and saying things that deep down we know are wrong. Last week we read a text in which Jesus warned the disciples against the teachings of the Sadducees and Pharisees. Ideas are powerful and dangerous things and we have a tendency to let the wrong ideas in. Just as when Joseph's brothers allowed the thought of his luck to become hatred and envy. And in truth that same dynamic can be seen at work in our social and economic systems. The most extreme example of that is the plethora of conspiracy theories that live on the web these days.

The story of Joseph and his brothers is finally a story about the triumph of love and hope, for the brothers reconciled and realized that blood truly is thicker than water. Joseph may be the hero of the tale, but credit has to be given to the brothers, as well. They were able to confess and seek sincere reconciliation. As it happens, that's exactly the formula that Nelson Mandela spoke of as the only path to national health in the wake of apartheid in South Africa. First comes acknowledgment and confession, then and only then is reconciliation possible.

When Jesus tells us to love our enemies he does not mean that we should accept victimization. We can forgive those who trespass against us and yet continue to oppose what they do. We can even fight back while remaining true to the spirit of the gospel. For in the end, it is The Gospel and the values it teaches, that are the antidotes to human craziness both from within ourselves, our families and out there in the world.