

“Good Intentions”

Valley Presbyterian Church – September 27, 2020

17th Sunday after Pentecost

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Genesis 37:2-8, 50:15-21

Introduction

When we left the Genesis story, Abraham was standing in faith while awaiting God’s promised son. In time, God came through on the promise and Abraham, with Sarah, had a son, whom they called Isaac. But things did not go smoothly; in their impatience, Abraham and Sarah sought another way to find an answer and the birth of Ishmael, through Hagar, their Egyptian servant, brings conflict into the story.

Ishmael is banished and Isaac grew up and had a family of his own, with twins: Esau and Jacob. But this family does not escape the conflict. Parental favoritism and sibling rivalry tears the family in two. Jacob ran away from the conflict in his father’s house and ended up in conflict in his uncle’s house. But by the time he heads home to face his estranged brother, Esau, Jacob has his own large family. But alas, all is not well in the household of Jacob.

This week, we explore the story of Joseph. It is a long narrative; spanning between our first reading – when we meet cocky, young Joseph and his angry older brothers – and the final chapter where Joseph was able to forgive his alienated brothers and they reconcile. What had been torn apart by jealousy and anger is repaired by forgiveness. The past could not be changed, but the future still could.

Read Genesis 37:2-8 and 50:15-21

No, not all is well in the household of Jacob. As it is so often in life, the picking child favorites and sibling rivalry leads to discord, hatred, and even violence. Joseph, though the youngest of the children, is clearly Jacob’s favorite. All the brothers are sons of Jacob but by four different mothers, and they know that his favorite wife was Rachel. Joseph is the child of Jacob’s old age and his mother, Rachel, is dead. The relationship between Jacob, Joseph and his brothers is loaded with tension.

The conflict escalates in three phases: first, seventeen year-old Joseph brings a “bad report” about his brothers to Jacob. We do not know whether this “bad

report” is justified or mere tattling. But we soon learn that because Jacob loves Joseph more than his other sons and, by giving him a special coat with long sleeves – and, possibly, many colors – treats him like a prince, the brothers turn this overt favoritism into hatred for Joseph. So, when Joseph tells his brothers about his dream, suggesting that they will one day bow down to him, it is no surprise that they “hate him even more.” It is hard not to empathize with the brothers here: Jacob and Joseph have been stoking the fires of conflict.¹

The brothers’ first plan is to kill Joseph, next to throw him into a pit. “Let’s see what will become of his dreams,” the brothers say when tossing him in; before realizing that they will profit nothing from leaving him there. Finally, they take advantage of a caravan traveling their way and sell Joseph to the traders, who are headed down to Egypt. When the brothers show Joseph’s blood-stained coat to their father, Jacob’s grief is so immense that likely the brothers would go back and retrace their steps if they could. But the evil deed has been done.

One could wonder how long it took after this betrayal and enslavement before Joseph was able to contemplate forgiveness. If his brothers had shown up within a few years of this incident they probably would have found him far less compassionate. But the years pass and Joseph is able to use his gift of interpreting dreams to rise to power in Egypt as Pharaoh’s right-hand man: the one who ensured that there would be grain enough to survive any famine.

Eventually, the famine leads Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food, and to their surprise, they find Joseph, who invites his family to resettle there. With the perspective of time, Joseph is able to see his tragic story of sibling rivalry and violence, enslavement and suffering, for what it truly is; telling his brothers, “so it was not you who sent me here, but God.”

As his long and eventful life nears its end, Jacob blesses his children on his deathbed. A large entourage takes his body to be laid to rest in Abraham’s cave. Jacob’s death brings about a shift in the family dynamics. The guilt of the brothers, buried for so long, wells back up. What if their powerful younger brother, Joseph, has held onto resentment for all these years? What if their father, now dead, was their only security?

Once again, they make a plan. They report to Joseph their father’s wishes, unknown until now, that Joseph forgive them of their long-standing crime.

¹ Jacquelyn Lapsley from *WorkingPreacher.com*

Whether this message is fabrication or not, Joseph was not aware of it; and he weeps when he hears it.²

There is a lot of weeping throughout this heart-wrenching story; publicly and privately. When he was first told that Joseph had been killed, Jacob wept; when his brothers show up, even before he reveals his identity to them, Joseph weeps. When his father dies, and even now, when Joseph is told about his dying wishes, Joseph weeps again. There is much sadness in this family which has been plagued by favoritism, jealousy and hatred for so long; in order for there to be forgiveness and reconciliation, the years of sadness and pain must be acknowledged.

We can't change the past. But with forgiveness, we can begin a journey that will change the future. The first step is to free ourselves from bearing the pain inflicted by someone else. It might be that their intentions were bad. But forgiveness offers the chance of restored or renewed relationship; maybe not exactly like it was before, but more genuine as a result.³

Joseph famously tells his brothers at the end: "Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." The story suggests that while God does not will the brothers into a hatred that leads them to violence, God is nonetheless at work in a world that is shaped by human actions. God is present through the actions of Jacob, Joseph, his brothers, Pharaoh, and all those others who move the story along to its conclusion.

In spite of the brothers' bad intentions, good has been done. The designs of humans can really be for evil, their actions can be free, and yet the intent of God for good can still prevail. From Joseph's perspective, the wrong that they had done to him years ago has vanished. Or, better, the burden of pain that he had endured has been transformed; giving Joseph the ability to forgive and save the lives of others.

God did not desire Joseph's pain anymore than God desires mine of yours. That is not who God is. When people are mistreated or betrayed by those they love, that is wrong and it needs to be named. There might be a time in the future to talk about how God was able to use the pain of those situations for transformation, but it comes later, often much later. To name it in the midst of the pain is a kind of

² Celia Brewer Sinclair, "Genesis" from *Interpretation Bible Studies*

³ Dave Daubert, "Forgiveness – the Road to a New Future"

violence on its own. Sometimes, transformation doesn't come at all, and the tragedy is not redeemed.

In Christ, God offers forgiveness in Jesus' name. In other words, forgiving the people that you are angry with has already been accomplished by God. It is our choice if and when we are ready to forgive them as well. This will do nothing to change the past; but forgiveness can still change the future; and the way ahead can be different if you allow grace to lead you down that road.

Parental favoritism and hatred among siblings are just wrong. They can and do destroy many families: leading to separation, sadness, and regret. And we could expand the same truths from families to neighborhoods and nations and communities of faith. Whether the intentions were for bad or for good, we can learn a lot about what not to do by looking at these stories from the Old Testament. But in the practice of forgiveness, and in the understanding that God can use the worst human actions to create a positive outcome, Joseph shows us that even a spoiled prince of a child can be transformed into a reconciler and savior of his family. The past may not be changed, but the future can. With God, whose intentions are always good, all things are indeed possible. Amen.