

Good and Bad Intentions
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I decided to elaborate on the lectionary readings for this Sunday, because I get frustrated with little snippets of great stories. And the book of Genesis is a series of great stories, crowned by the last 14 chapters, the “novella” of Joseph and his brothers. Sometime I hope that you will read the whole 14 chapters all the way through, because they are so rich, so full of surprise and symbolism, so foundational to appreciating human nature and the self-understanding of our ancestors in faith.

So, today we heard a bit of last week’s reading (in case it sounded familiar to any of you) when Joseph, second youngest of Jacob’s brood, is attacked by his 10 older brothers and sold into slavery. Why this violence? Well, it was not completely without reason: Joseph was the favorite of his father, who did not bother to disguise it, and gave Joseph a beautiful special coat. Joseph also tattled on his brothers. Joseph also told them about dreams in which they all bowed down to him. In other words, he was an arrogant, clueless 17-year-old brat. And his brothers were not known for their patience and forbearance. They also were not particularly honest: they lie to their father about Joseph’s death, causing deep sorrow. In some ways, the epitome of the most dysfunctional blended family.

I skipped forward 22 years in the Scripture reading. During that time, Joseph is sold to the Egyptian officer Potiphar, becomes overseer of the household, is falsely accused of attacking his master’s wife, is imprisoned, becomes head prisoner (in charge of everyone else), is freed to counsel the Pharaoh about dreams, becomes viceroy of Egypt, and marries an Egyptian woman. You just couldn’t keep Joseph down, in spite of all his misfortunes, because, as we are told several times, “The Lord was with him.” He was the golden boy.

Joseph does get to meet those older brothers again. I can imagine them arriving in Egypt, looking for grain to buy because of the famine in Canaan: the gaunt, grey, dusty, long-bearded nomads standing before the smooth and powerful young viceroy. They bow down before him, and he knows right away who they are, though he conceals it. He speaks to them harshly, imprisons them for a few days, and then sends them back with a command to bring their youngest sibling, Joseph’s full brother Benjamin along next time. There is a long, 2 year game of cat and mouse, where he manipulates these nervous, guilty, hungry men, offering them food and accusing them of treachery. He’s within his rights, isn’t he? It’s no worse than what they did to him.

What changes his mind, what turns his heart towards forgiveness? Is it seeing his younger brother again? Is it hearing his brother Judah offer to become a slave so that Benjamin can return to his father? Was it just a slow building of need – the need of one who had lost the connection and love of family through his own arrogance and the jealousy of others? Was it realizing the extent of his own power to choose between life and death, love and hate? Was it because “the Lord was with him” and that spark of divine presence could not allow the cruel game of pretense to continue?

However it happened, the transformation is deeply emotional: it says that “Joseph could no longer control himself” before all these people, and he sent his Egyptian staff away for the moment of real reunion. Though he might not have bothered: they could hear his loud weeping from a long way off. “I am Joseph! Is my father still alive?” are the first heart-breaking words out of his mouth...perhaps the first words in Hebrew that they have heard him speak. Of course, the first reaction of the brothers is not joy, but fear, dismay and silence. What revenge is this golden boy, this icon of wealth and power, going to take?

But Joseph truly is broken-hearted, in the sense that his heart has broken open with the need to forgive and to be restored to his family. He does not even need a statement of remorse from them, because he has constructed an understanding of the past, and an understanding of God that does not require this kind of judgment. Maybe it is a convenient fantasy, this new interpretation of his life story, this new interpretation of his dreams. He is the only one in the room who could say, “God intended all this for good.” “There is a goodness that God can pull out of your actions, even out of your cruelty – now God will preserve life where you disregarded it.”

The obvious story line here is the description of the way that the nomadic descendants of Abraham did not die out in a famine, but emigrated to Egypt for a number of generations. It sets the stage for the next episode of history, the Exodus. But the hidden story line is that God intended this for a good lesson. Joseph was sent to Egypt, separated from his family and put in positions of vulnerability and power so that he could teach his brothers something about forgiveness. And in the process, teach the Hebrew people and all of us who have followed these traditions of sacred story something about sorrow and love and forgiveness.

I have to stress that this is Joseph the dreamer’s interpretation of his own life. Nobody can do this for him: not his father, not the Pharaoh, and certainly not his brothers. He does not say that God intended him to be hurt in those particular ways. But he chooses to believe that God’s good intentions have more potential and power than our own bad intentions. God can take the messy raw material, the broken fragments, the lost dreams of our lives and create a new community, a future.

Lest we think that all is totally resolved by this insight, and all distrust has evaporated, and everybody is angelic, the writer of Genesis has a couple of afterthoughts. One is this admonition from Joseph as he sends his brothers back to Canaan with supplies and a promise of land from Pharaoh. “As they were leaving, he said to them, ‘Do not quarrel along the way.’” Because they are still very quarrelsome people. And they are also still willing to stretch the truth, as we see in an episode later on, after the death of their father Jacob. The older brothers become convinced that Joseph still holds a grudge and has just been waiting for this moment to take his revenge. To forestall this, they come up with a deathbed speech from their father asking for forgiveness. It is as though they can’t quite bring themselves to spit out the words, “We were guilty of harming you,” but they can quote their father saying it. Hmmm...sounds like that messy human nature, that messy dysfunctional family, still in play.

There, in almost the very last words of the book of Genesis, we see Joseph’s fully developed theology of reconciliation. He says, “Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good...as he is doing today.” Ultimate forgiveness is with God, and resolution is between God and the sinner. Joseph refuses to hinder this resolution in any way. He

steps out of the place of judge, and into the place of loving brother. And he may need to do it again and again. Because that's the way families are.

Centuries later, Jesus had a few words to say about families. In some ways, he was creating new families, with new bonds of relationship, with his own life and ministry. He said that blood ties were not as important as the intention to do the will of God. He said this not to escape his own family, with whatever old baggage and hurts and grudges they carried. He said it to open up spaces in all our relationships when God could get in. He said this so that our hearts could break open the way Joseph's had, with tears of sorrow for the past and words of promise from the future. He said this to release us from the slavery of retribution and into the freedom of forgiveness.

This is hard work. It is hard for families and hard for communities and hard for nations. It is hard because it will never be finished, not while we reside within these broken vessels of our earthly life. But it is hard work with blessings all along the way. I pray that God will show each of us, and all of us together, what God intends for good. Amen.

*Reading Selections from Genesis

37: ... So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him" —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.... When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt....

Then the brothers took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. They had the long robe with sleeves taken to their father, and they said, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning." Thus his father bewailed him....

Twenty two years pass

45: Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, "Send everyone away from me." So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?" But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence. Then Joseph said to his brothers, "Come closer to me." And they came closer. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years; and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you

who sent me here, but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt...

I will provide for you in Goshen—since there are five more years of famine to come—so that you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.’ And now your eyes and the eyes of my brother Benjamin see that it is my own mouth that speaks to you. You must tell my father how greatly I am honored in Egypt, and all that you have seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.” Then he fell upon his brother Benjamin’s neck and wept, while Benjamin wept upon his neck. And he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him.

When the report was heard in Pharaoh’s house, “Joseph’s brothers have come,” Pharaoh and his servants were pleased. Pharaoh said to Joseph, “Say to your brothers, ‘Do this: load your animals and go back to the land of Canaan. Take your father and your households and come to me, so that I may give you the best of the land of Egypt, and you may enjoy the fat of the land.’” ... The sons of Israel did so. Joseph gave them wagons according to the instruction of Pharaoh.... Then he sent his brothers on their way, and as they were leaving he said to them, “Do not quarrel along the way.”

50 Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph’s brothers said, “What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?” So they approached Joseph, saying, “Your father gave this instruction before he died, ‘Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.’ Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father.” Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, “We are here as your slaves.” But Joseph said to them, “Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.