

Betsey Moe
Sermon 11.22.09
“Rivalry and Redemption”

Genesis 37:1-36

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. 2This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. 3Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. 4But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

5Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. 6He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. 7There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” 8His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. 9He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” 10But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” 11So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

12Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem....Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. 18They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. 19They said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. 20Come 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.” 21But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.” 22Reuben 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.

23So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. 28When 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. 29When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. 30He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?”

31Then they took Joseph's robe, slaughtered a goat, and dipped the robe in the blood. 32They 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." 33He recognized it, and said, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces." 34Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son many days.

Genesis 50:15-21

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?" 16So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 17'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. 18Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." 19But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? 20Even 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. 21So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

It's Thanksgiving week – a week that many of us look forward to because of the long weekend and the chance to be with our families and friends. Usually, the week before Thanksgiving, I imagine what it's going to be like. I see damp, gray skies contrasted with the warm house into which I am welcomed with hugs and kisses. I picture mini-reunions with cousins and siblings I haven't seen in a while in front of a glowing fire in the fireplace. Then I see a simple, yet beautifully-set table with a steaming, golden turkey at the center and lots of comfort food surrounding it. As we sit down to eat, I look into the familiar eyes of the family members around me, eyes that resemble my own, and we engage in deep conversation about things that matter: work and children, joys and heartaches of the past year. There is an occasional interruption of thunderous laughter.

And then I realize that this is not my family; this is a Safeway commercial. In my family, it wouldn't be Thanksgiving if there weren't some tension. And I don't think my family is unique; Eric and I lived thirteen years far away from family, and often we spent Thanksgiving around other peoples' tables. This is what I've noticed: real thanksgivings with real families have spilled milk, sometimes spilled wine, overflowing toilets, dry turkeys that aren't ready at the right time, three different kinds of stuffing because of picky eaters. Real thanksgivings with real families have moments of resentment over food preparation and clean-up, heated arguments over politics or religion that get dropped in awkward silence. Real thanksgivings with real families have quite a bit of silence while people scarf down food. Or for some families, there is no silence because the football game is blaring in the background. I would guess that many people lie in bed after a big Thanksgiving meal with family and wonder why they look forward to it every year.

Let's face it: living in families is a challenge. There is this rightful expectation out there that families are supposed to be safe places – places for nurture and identity-formation, places for encouragement and healing, places for honesty and truth spoken in love. But ironically, it is often

in families where people are hurt the most. Sometimes, we feel at liberty to say things to family members that we would never say to friends or co-workers. Tempers flare that are normally held in check; we sit out and let someone else do the work when we would normally jump right up to help; we storm away from an argument in silence when, with friends or co-workers we would normally work the problem out. Families *can* bring out the worst in people.

This was certainly true in Jacob's household, filled with brothers who could not seem to get along. Long before Joseph donned a fancy coat, resentment reigned in this family, in part because of Jacob's favoritism toward one of his four wives. Remember from the sermon a couple weeks back when Jacob was coming in fear to reunite with his brother Esau, and he heard that Esau was coming with four hundred men? Jacob put the maids (otherwise known as his *wives* Bilhah and Zilpah) and his children by them in the front of the line, so that if Esau came with violence, they would be killed first. Then he put his wife Leah and her children behind them (because he really hadn't wanted Leah as his wife in the first place), and in the back, he put Rachel and Joseph, the wife and child whom he really loved. Most of the sons in the front lines were not little kids; they knew what was going on. Talk about breeding resentment in the family!

And then came heartache to this family; Jacob's daughter Dinah was raped, and two of the brothers, Simeon and Levi, took bloody vengeance on an entire city for what one man had done to their sister. Because of their actions, the whole family was forced to move to a safer location. Their father Jacob was infuriated; the tension in the family mounted.

So by the time we hear about the story of Joseph, this family is already broken; they have been divided by favoritism and violation and vengeance. But there is more brokenness to come. Joseph, rather than downplay his role as Jacob's pet, tattles on his brothers when he is old enough to know better, and what's more, he flaunts the special long-sleeved coat that was a gift from his father. The text says that "when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers," (as if this were a *new* revelation,) "they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (37:4). Then Joseph tells them his dreams of them bowing before him, and they "hated him even more." I can tell you right now that Safeway would not have filmed their Thanksgiving commercials at Jacob's house that year.

What happens next? The brothers sell Joseph into slavery and lead their father to believe that Joseph is dead. So to this family story of favoritism and violation and vengeance and resentment, add now deceit and deep mourning. At the end of Genesis 37, we wonder, "What could become of such a broken family? What good could ever come out of such hurt?"

Well, a lot happens in the intervening years; between chapters 37 and 50, Joseph rises to power in Egypt, not without bumps and turns along the way, but in an amazing stroke of providence, is in a position to provide food for his despicable family when they face starvation and death. Joseph *could have*, after all those years, used his power to satisfy his own need for restitution. He could have done violence back to his brothers. He could have belittled them, demanding that they be slaves in the land in return for food. He could have turned them away. And he would have been justified! Now, if you read the whole Joseph saga, you see that he does play a few mind games with his brothers before revealing his identity. But in the end, Joseph used his power to offer grace. Joseph let down the wall of resentment and *cried*. And then to these brothers, who

at one time could not speak peaceably to him, Joseph spoke kindly: “Though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good.” One would never believe it, but out of this broken family story comes one of the most moving scenes of reconciliation and redemption in all of scripture.

What is so satisfying about this scene is the effect that Joseph’s tears have on his brothers. He may not have realized it, but Joseph was making room for a different way of relating as family. When Joseph cried, his brothers cried. They “fell down before him,” which, ironically, fulfilled Joseph’s dream from the beginning of the story. God’s plan, as it turned out, was not that Joseph would reign and his brothers would bow down in worship; God’s plan, God’s dream for this family was that they bow down in humility and learn forgiveness.

Some scholars say the Joseph story is about God preserving the promise to Israel – that it’s about God keeping the seed of this nation alive despite the selfish, self-destructive behavior of the chosen family. And I see that. This chosen family does survive, and they eventually grow exponentially while they live in Egypt. But I see something else in this story. I see a way of redeemed life marked by forgiveness rather than perfection emerging among God’s people. Growing in numbers was not God’s end-all goal for them; growing in their humanity, in their ability to be a blessing and offer grace to one another, was. Their family, and eventually, their Hebrew community, would be the best context in which this give-and-take of grace could occur.

And now we, who are a part of that same covenant through Christ, still have the greatest opportunity to reflect and experience the grace of God *in our imperfect families*. In our families, where hurts run deep, where patterns seem to be unalterable, words of grace that we offer to each other are life-giving: “I was wrong,” “I forgive you,” “I love you” – these words are transformative, and they set us apart as God’s people.

This applies to our church family as well. There may be people in our church who rub us the wrong way, who disagree with us theologically, or who simply do things differently than we would. Some of you may feel like the odd child out whom most people ignore. This is the nature of church families.

In both cases – in our own families and in our church family – we are faced with choices. Do we engage in the relationships or do we sit out? Do we speak with defensiveness or do we let down our guard and reveal our vulnerability? When we act with the kind of gentle courage that Joseph had, we open our whole family to experiencing the transformative grace of God.

Joseph’s family did not live happily ever after, once their great scene of reconciliation occurred. No, it was not one continuous Safeway Thanksgiving commercial after that. In Joseph’s family, things would fall apart after Joseph died; the descendants of Jacob’s family would eventually become oppressed slaves in Egypt, and they would need God’s redemption all over again. As you go out to your family meals this week, or at other times, you are sure to realize that God’s work we are a part of is on-going and not without struggle. But someday, when we join together with the whole family of God to worship in a fully redeemed creation, it will all be worth it.