

Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34, 50:15-21

Joseph

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I am sure I've mentioned before that I don't enjoy movies and television in the same ways many other people do. While many people set their DVRs to record their favorite shows and binge-watch series on Netflix, I mostly watch the news. And the movies I enjoy the most are the ones that I already know the ending to and that ending is "and they lived happily ever after." Many people have asked me why this is and my answer is always, "Real life is dramatic enough. I don't need made up drama." I haven't always felt this way though.

When I was younger, there were television shows I wouldn't miss. One of them was a show called Dallas. I looked it up this week and found that Dallas ended in 1991, so for you youngsters...The series revolved around a wealthy and feuding Texas family, the Ewings, who owned the independent oil company Ewing Oil and the cattle-ranching land of Southfork. Initially the focus of the series was on the marriage of Bobby Ewing and Pamela Barnes, whose families were sort of like the Hatfields and the McCoys-enemies. As the series progressed, Bobby's older brother, oil tycoon J.R. Ewing, became the guy everyone loved to hate. His only loyalty was to himself...and to money. Viewers of the show had a front row seat to the dysfunction of the Ewing family, which seemed to get worse with every season. To give you some idea of the level of dysfunction going on, one of the most watched episodes of Dallas was titled, "Who Shot J.R.?

I realized this week that a lot of the TV I used to watch was centered around dysfunctional family relationships. In fact, I am hard pressed to think of a single show that didn't have some kind of family drama going on. Could it be that we are attracted to family dysfunction? We gravitate toward what's familiar and there is a weird comfort in being able to say, "Well at least nobody in our family has done THAT!" In one way or another, we can relate and that translates to big money for television people and advertisers.

Family dysfunction was around long before television though. And today's sermon text is proof. Like a lot of the biblical narrative, this story is not based on historical facts, but it does contain truth. And you will see that whoever told today's story

first knew a little something about dysfunction. Note: I use the term dysfunction without any judgment attached to it because I recognize every family has its share of dysfunction. This is true because, well...people. Where there are people, there is dysfunction. At the heart of the dysfunction in our story today is a man named Jacob. But, before we talk specifically about Jacob and his family, let me catch you up because we have covered a lot of ground in Genesis the last couple of weeks.

We began in Genesis, at the beginning, with the second creation story, where God created the first human beings from the earth and brought them to life with God's own breath. And we saw that, from the very beginning, human beings put the "FUN" in dysfunction, while God, like a potter, continued the work of forming and reforming creation. Last week, we read part of the story of Abraham and his wife, Sarah. We saw the dawn of Abraham's faith, the moment he looked up at the stars in the night sky and said, "I believe" to the promises God made to him. Those promises were to have land, descendants, and to be a blessing to the world.

Since then, in the narrative, God made good on God's promise of descendants for Abraham. Both Hagar (Sarah's slave) and Sarah had sons. Abraham's sons' names were Ishmael (from Hagar) and Isaac (from Sarah). The Genesis storyline continues through the lineage of Isaac, who married Rebekah and became the father of Jacob and Esau. Jacob was both a trickster, which is a nice way of saying he was manipulative at times. He was also a dreamer. With a pot of soup, he bought his brother's birthright, and later he tricked, "manipulated," their father out of Esau's blessing. He was discovered and while running away, he had a dream about angels coming and going from earth on a ladder.

After marrying sisters, Leah and Rachel, Jacob and his brother, Esau, eventually reconciled, and Jacob had another dream. This one about wrestling with God and coming out the other side with a blessing and a new name: Israel. Jacob had twelve sons by four women. Leah, the wife who Jacob did not love, gave birth to his first son, Reuben, followed by Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Then, Rachel's slave, Bilhah, had two sons, Dan and Naphtali. Next, Leah's slave, Zilpah, had two sons, Gad and Asher. Then Leah had Issachar, Zebulun, and a daughter, Dinah. Still, Rachel, the wife who Jacob did love, had no children.

Finally, though, in Genesis 30:22-24, “Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb.<sup>23</sup> She conceived and bore a son...<sup>24</sup> and she named him Joseph...” Later, Rachel gave birth to Benjamin, dying in the process. Jacob made no secret of the fact that of his twelve sons; he loved Joseph the most because he was the first son born to the wife he truly loved. As a symbol of his love, Jacob gave Joseph a long-sleeved robe, which served as a glaring reminder to his brothers that their father had a favorite.

We pick up the story today in Genesis chapter 37.

**37** Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.<sup>2</sup> This 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.<sup>3</sup> Now 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.<sup>4</sup> But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

<sup>5</sup> Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup> There 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.” <sup>8</sup> His 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.

Joseph wasn’t doing much to endear himself to his brothers. He tattled on them to their father, a typical younger sibling move. And then there was this dream. You might think perhaps, rather than escalate the tension, he might keep the details of his dream to himself. But no, Joseph told them about his dream, that one day they would bow down to him. Just what every older brother wants to hear from a younger brother.

His brothers hated him so much they hatched a plan to kill Joseph and throw him in a pit. At Rueben’s insistence though, they just stripped him of his long-sleeved robe and then threw him in a pit. While he was in the pit, a group of Ishmaelites

came along. Ishmaelites descended from the other side of Abraham's family that began with Isaac's brother, Ishmael. They were glad to take Joseph off their hands. The brothers sold Joseph for 20 pieces of silver. What would they tell Jacob?

To cover their tracks, they put some goat's blood on Joseph's robe and took it to their father, who was devastated and assumed his favorite son had been killed by wild animals. In the meantime, Joseph was taken to Egypt and sold again to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's officials. A lot happened to Joseph in Egypt, while his father grieved his death, but basically, he landed on his feet and ended up in a position of considerable influence because he knew how to interpret dreams. He ended up saving Egypt and his own people, including his brothers and father, from a famine. His family ended up in Egypt on some nice land with all of their needs met.

So now, at the end of Genesis, in chapter 50, Jacob has just died and the brothers are afraid that Joseph will finally get back at them for selling him to the Ishmaelites.

This is Genesis 50:16-21:

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

When we get to the end of the story, we see that Joseph's dream came true. His brothers finally bowed down before him. But Joseph doesn't react like we might expect, saying something like, "See, I told you so. Here you are bowing down before me." Instead he forgives them for what they had done. The dream he had all those years ago wasn't his dream any more. His dream of power and control had been replaced by a longing for reconciliation and love. And I've been thinking about that this week. I've been imagining how the world would be different if all of us shared a dream of reconciliation and love. How we turn our dreams of

grabbing more power, more wealth, more, more, more, into dreams of reconciliation and love?

In order to answer that we need to know how we go here. Where did the dysfunction begin? For Joseph, it began with Jacob. His blatant favoritism of one child over the others was the cause of the tension between the brothers and Joseph. Let me use the gift of the long-sleeved robe as an example. And let's extract ourselves from our world of Wal-marts and strip malls for a moment. In the context of this story, every piece of clothing was made specifically for someone. There was no clearance rack at the front of the store, no Amazon, not even a general store. If a person needed some sort of garment, it was made especially for them.

This long-sleeved robe was made especially for Joseph. It was one of a kind. It may not have actually been a flashy coat of many colors, but the point was, it was a significant gift. A gift that was given to only one son and not even Jacob's oldest son, which might have been expected in that tradition. It wasn't subtle at all. The gift was a public declaration that Jacob had a favorite and it was Joseph. This gift and the brothers' reaction to it, highlights the trauma caused when love is withheld. We've all heard it, right? "Hurt people, hurt people."

When we withhold love from people, it is painful. And that pain can be life-changing. I've seen this first-hand when lesbian, gay, and trans people have come out to their families, when they have finally decided to stop pretending they are someone they aren't. I've seen parents completely cut ties with their children. They refuse to attend weddings, miss the birth of grandchildren, graduations. And the damage this does...when the people who ought to love us the most reject us, it is devastating.

It affects every aspect of our lives, every relationship, every age, every season, everything. Withholding love doesn't just happen in families, though. As a nation, we live with the consequences of withholding neighborly love from one another. For example, the migrant children separated from their parents will be affected forever by the ways in which we are not loving them. And the trauma they will live with will affect all of us. Black people in this nation are trying to tell us how centuries of withheld love has gotten us where we are. Systemic racism is affecting all of us, even if we have white skin. When our neighbors hurt, we all

hurt in one way or another. We were created for community. We were meant for companionship, to love and be loved. And when love is withheld, we (as individuals and as a community) cannot be whole.

That seems to be what Joseph was seeking at the end of this story. And it was hard for his brothers to grasp. Joseph developed the resilience to heal and to live because his father gave him a gift that, unfortunately, the brothers never received. It wasn't the robe. It was the gift of knowing he was lovable. Joseph's life wasn't easy. He experienced truly awful things, but he always knew he was more than a slave. He was a child of Israel. And he was loved.

Being a dreamer served Joseph well and maybe it would serve us well too. Or are we living in such a mess right now that we have forgotten our dreams or have we stopped dreaming all together? I hope not because our neighbors need us to be dreamers, to dream of justice, peace, love, and reconciliation. And we need to love our neighbors so that they can begin to dream along with us.

Look...I know this is an anxious season. As we draw closer to the election, I promise you, the anxiety will increase, in our community, in our state, in our nation, and maybe even in our own hearts. But in the midst of it, we have to keep dreaming, not of being able to say, "I told you so. I won!" on the day after the election. No, let's keep dreaming of a future where we all win (even the ones who disagree with us on how to get there or even the ones who seem to have a different dream. Let's dream of a world where everyone has access to healthcare, where Black lives matter, where our nation is safe for all people, where everyone has enough, and each person knows Love. I guess what I'm suggesting is that we dream of happily ever after for all of us, not just for some of us. Dream big, dear ones.