

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 4:1-16
Genesis 37:1-8; 12-28
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STORIES OF JOSEPH: JEALOUSY

I am the younger of two brothers in my family. When I was very young, I thought my big brother always had a great idea about everything. But then there was this one Christmas when I was two and a half and my brother was five. As gifts from our aunt, we each received an identical toy we both liked, which was a rather amazing event. The toys were indistinguishable except one was green and the other was red. My brother, Keith, got the red one and wanting the green one instead, he said, "Hey, Kirby, let's trade." Up to that point, he could have expected me to always say, "Yeah," in response to his ideas. But this time, I had finally figured out that I could have a different idea or opinion from my brother. To his offer, I said, "No!" And my aunt used to laugh and laugh as she told the story of the shocked look on my brother's face this first time his little brother told him, "No." I have no direct memory of this event, but I have to imagine that it must have felt good to have something that my big, strong brother was jealous of, that I some power over whether he could have it. He was big enough that he could have simply taken the green toy from me, but I was learning how to complain to Mom or Dad about any mistreatment I might be getting from their older son.

Among the more interesting and challenging of human relationships are those between siblings at various ages. We see that reflected with the figures who are described as the children of Adam and Eve, the first set of brothers, Cain and Abel. As a younger brother, I'll point out that it was Abel, the younger brother, whose offering to the Lord was found to be acceptable, while older brother, Cain's offering was not. The acceptability is not explained, but for those who first heard or read this story, it would be a surprise that God did not favor whatever the first born did. The first born in that society and time were treated as special, getting all kinds of favored treatment over younger siblings. Cain didn't handle the challenging situation well. His jealousy of God's favor overwhelmed him and we're told he was very angry. Was he angry at God or at Abel? Perhaps, both, but he couldn't strike out at God as he could his brother. Here's the story of the very first set of brothers and one murders the other. God then asks Cain where his brother Abel was. Cain lies saying he doesn't know and then adds, "Am I my brother's keeper?" To which God could have responded, "No, but you are to be your brother's brother." However, Cain had given away that opportunity by taking away his brother's life.

The book of Genesis does not tell stories that model much akin to what could be called 'brotherly love.' After Cain kills Abel, there are the strained relations between the sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac. Then there are the broken relationship accounts that go back to the birth of Isaac's twin sons, Esau and Jacob. After that, we get to the sons of Jacob, who was also called Israel. There are twelve of them by four different wives, and the dysfunction we see is a good episodic indicator to disfavor polygamy. The descendents of these sons would later be referred to as the twelve tribes of Israel. Joseph is the eleventh of the twelve, and for some reason, he is his father's favorite. Again, in a setting where the eldest was expected to be favored, one of the youngest is instead. Jacob gives Joseph a special coat – some translations refer to it as a coat of many colors. A better translation is likely that it was a robe with long sleeves, which would be the kind of garment worn by someone who wasn't expected to have to work hard, almost a royal robe. It was a Saks Fifth Avenue coat whereas all the other brothers had been given one from J.C. Penney's. As a result, his brothers are jealous of Joseph and we're told that they hate him and could not speak peaceably to him.

Given that dynamic, it is not surprising that by the age of seventeen, Joseph has become a bit of a brat. He tattles to his father on his brothers when they slack off from their shepherding duties. And then he has the audacity,

while wearing his coat, to tell his brothers of his dreams which his brothers hear as his delusion that he would one day reign over them. A dream of a different status quo can be a powerful thing, and Joseph's brothers exert their power to not only undermine his dreams but to take out the dreamer. In a jealous rage, they plot to murder him. They strip off his fancy coat and drop him into a deep pit. But instead of killing him, they end up selling him into slavery to traveling traders on their way to Egypt. In so doing, they are confident that they had at least killed Joseph's dream. In order to deceive their father, they dip Joseph's fancy coat in goat's blood and lead their father to believe that a wild animal had devoured his favored son. Perhaps we are familiar with this story from bible storybooks and Sunday school or from the musical, "Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat." Over the next four weeks, I invite you to travel with me through this longest of the narratives found in the Book of Genesis.

The stories of broken human relationships from even the first book of the bible indicate that God is concerned with more than just the relationship between humanity and God. From the very start, we see how our relationship with God can affect our relationship with other humans. And how we relate to those who are to be our sisters or brothers, by blood or in spirit, certainly impacts the relationship we have with God.

We see here the complicated mix of human sinfulness with a divine plan that is not thwarted even by misguided and malicious actions. In the story of Joseph, we will see suffering, injustices, displacement, and famine, combined with God's gracious providence that not only sustains Joseph through dreadful events, but that provides for the basic needs of the larger family while also bringing an opportunity for the restoration of relationship between the brothers.

Jealousy is among the deep-seated feelings that can undermine our relationships with people and with God. If allowed to grow and fester within us, it can be destructive of relationships and people, including ourselves. What is called the Serenity Prayer has been popularized by twelve-step groups and others. It was written by a prominent theologian named Reinhold Niebuhr. Although it is found in several versions, the most popular first part of the prayer begins this way: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, The courage to change the things I can, And the wisdom to know the difference." ¹

I guess I wish it was called the Serenity, Courage, and Wisdom prayer. God can replace jealousy and others things that lead to broken relationships with these three gifts that arise out of a confidence that God can work for glorious things through and in spite of our human foibles. We'll see how that happens in the Joseph story and hopefully see it in our own stories as well. May God grant us all the serenity, courage, and wisdom we need relating to others and to God this day and going forward. Amen.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serenity_Prayer

