Sermon 09-22-19

Poor, Poor Joseph

Genesis 37:2b-4

**Sermon Starter**

What does or did your family look like? I’m talking about brothers and sisters. Did you have any or were you an only child? If your family is anything like mine, it may have been a mixed bag of relationships. I have sisters, half-sisters, and adopted sisters. You may have brothers, half-brothers, and adopted brothers. Maybe your family is a combination of both.

If you did have brothers and/or sisters, did you get along? For the most part, my sisters and I got along. Yeah, we had our sibling fights and rivalries, but generally we were a pretty happy bunch. We played tricks on each other and of course teased each other. I remember one evening we sat down for dinner and I grabbed my big glass of milk and took a big drink . . . sort of anyway. As soon as that milk touched my tongue I knew something was wrong, ran to the sink and spit it out. Sour? Nope. My sister decided it would be funny to lace my milk with salt! Now I can laugh. Then it was definitely not funny!

There are some families where it might be perceived that the parents treat one child differently than the others. We call it being mom or dad’s favorite. We might know what I’m getting at if I said, “Daddy’s (or mommy’s) little girl.” If that came from the mouth of siblings it might be lined with a bit of sarcasm.

Our scripture reading for this morning might be a good example. Let’s look at Genesis 37:2b-4:

**GRAPHIC: Joseph was 17 years old and tended the flock with his brothers. While he was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives, Joseph told their father unflattering things about them. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old. Jacob had made for him a long robe. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him and couldn’t even talk nicely to him.**

**Act One: Joseph and His Siblings – a Study in Family Dysfunction**

The story of Joseph and his multi-colored coat is found in Genesis 37-50. It is hailed as a masterpiece of ancient near eastern literature by both secular scholars and people of faith. In the ancient world people didn’t have books to read, and obviously no radio, television or movies. They had stories. Stories entertained, but they also taught both family history, but more importantly, they taught morals, values, and faith. The stories delighted and they inspired. This is clearly true of Joseph. Part of why I love Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice’s Broadway musical version of Joseph is that it does the same – it entertains, it delights and it teaches.

The story begins as a story of sibling rivalry, and brothers hating brothers. Jacob has four wives and 13 children – that sounds like a reality television show! He loves one of those brothers more than the others, and gives him special privileges and even a special multi-colored coat. As the story begins in Genesis 37 we read, **GRAPHIC: Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old.** Clearly Jacob had not read *any* parenting books! The favoritism he showed this one son did not endear him to the others. I love how Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Weber capture this in the musical. Take a look at this clip from the 1999 film version starring Donny Osmond…**VIDEO: “JOSEPH’S COAT.”**

The situation gets worse though. Joseph begins having dreams, dreams that one day he will rule over his brothers and sister and even his parents. Listen, if you have dreams like that regarding your siblings, DON’T TELL THEM!!! Joseph lacked the tact and he told them. He also tattled on his brothers, giving their father a bad report about them.

And it was here that the brothers grew to hate him all the more. In fact, they hated him so much that, when Joseph came out to join them tending their father’s sheep and goats, they seized their brothers, stole his coat, and then sold him to a caravan of Midianite slave traders on their way to Egypt, then told their father he’d been killed by wild animals!

We’re all brothers and sisters, right? Black and white, rich and poor, male and female. But sometimes we grow to resent each other, fear each other, even hate each other. It happens in families between siblings. Many of you have siblings that have hurt you, or whom you have hurt. Sometimes parents contribute to the problem, favoring one child over another. I’ve known men and women who came to hate their own flesh and blood brothers and sisters. I’ve preached funerals where someone had given explicit instructions not to let their siblings speak or even attend.

When this story was told around the campfires of ancient Israel, part of the point was to encourage siblings to show grace towards their brothers and sisters, and to encourage parents to be careful about favoring one child over another. It was a story, as we’ll see next week, inviting forgiveness for wrongs past.

if God’s word to us in this story might be a call to reconciliation with our siblings, I wonder if there are any of us who need to go home from church to write a letter apologizing for things said or done in the past? Or any of us who need to go home and evaluate the will we’ve prepared to see if it will harm our kids and their relationships after we are gone? And maybe it is a call to look at reconciliation among the races.

**Act Two: God’s Promise When the Innocent Suffer**

Let’s continue with the story. Joseph is taken to Egypt where the Ishmaelites sell him to an Egyptian named Potiphar, a man identified as the captain of Pharaoh’s guard. So the favored son has become a slave. We’re used to rags to riches stories, but this is a riches to rags story.

So what does Joseph do? Does he curse God and ask, “Why have you done this to me?” No. He continued to trust God, and he decided to make the best of the situation, serving Potiphar the best he could. That is a remarkable thing.

We all at times find ourselves somewhere we didn’t intend to be – life deals us a disappointing blow – we are slaves under Potiphar, rather than princes in the promised land. And Joseph teaches us to keep trusting God, and to do the next right thing. And here is what we read happened next, **GRAPHIC: The LORD was with Joseph…His master saw that the LORD was with him and that the LORD made everything he did successful. Potiphar thought highly of Joseph, and Joseph became his assistant.**

But the story gets even more interesting when in Genesis 39:6 we read, **GRAPHIC: Now Joseph was well-built and handsome.** **Sometime later, his master’s wife became attracted to Joseph and said, “Sleep with me.”** When Joseph rejects her advances, she feels jilted and in her anger she tells her husband that Joseph had been making advances towards here, and tried to force himself upon her! Potiphar becomes angry with Joseph and Genesis notes, **GRAPHIC: Joseph’s master took him and threw him in jail, the place where the king’s prisoners were held.**

Now Joseph finds himself in prison for a crime he didn’t commit. At this point we can only imagine how low Joseph felt. Weber and Rice capture it in this scene from *Joseph*, take a look, **VIDEO: CLOSE EVERY DOOR**

Life is sometimes hard. Sometimes the innocent suffer. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. God doesn’t intend such things. I don’t believe God made Joseph’s brothers to hate him or to sell him into slavery. I don’t think God intended Potiphar’s wife to attempt to seduce Joseph, nor did God put her up to lying and accusing Joseph of rape. But suffering and injustice are a part of life. So where is God in the midst of this? There is a line in Genesis 39:20b-21 that I love. Listen, **GRAPHIC: While he was in jail, the LORD was with Joseph and remained loyal to him.**

The jail cell we didn’t deserve to be in – God is with us there and remains loyal to us. In those unfair and difficult circumstances we may find ourselves in, God is with us and remains loyal to us. When life is hard and difficult, part of what Joseph’s story was meant to teach is that God will be with us, and loyal to us.

This promise to be with his people is repeated frequently in scripture. Look back to the promise we find in the Book of Matthew, where drawing from Isaiah, Matthew says of Jesus, **GRAPHIC: “His name shall be called Emmanuel (which means, ‘God is with us’).”**

God was with Joseph when his brothers threw him in the cistern, when they sold him into slavery, and when he was thrown by Potiphar in prison. And God will be with you.

One of the ways that God shows up when we’re walking through the darkness, and blesses and sustains us in our moment of despair, is by sending other people. For Joseph it was his brother Reuben who insisted on saving him from death. It was Potiphar who initially blessed him as a slave, and it was the jail keeper who elevated Joseph in prison.

Joseph reminds us of the ways in which brothers and sisters can hurt one another and offers a call for us to seek to be reconciled to our families. But it also teaches us that when we go through seasons of adversity, suffering and pain – through the fire or the flood – God is with us! And as we continue to trust in him, he will be loyal to us.

Yet, I want us to look at this story of Joseph and apply it to the events that have been plaguing this nation of ours over the last few weeks and months. There have been some very ugly incidents involving a rise in racial tensions across our land, some even very close to home.

Let’s remember who are our neighbors. We are of one race, the human race. But we’ve got pain between brothers and sisters. It’s going to require understanding how we’re affecting one another, hurting one another – walking in one another’s shoes, in order to heal this human family.

And God is with us in the midst of this no matter what the situation. In the mistreatment, in the bloodshed, in the injustice, in the car that’s pulled over and with the officer just trying to do their job.

**GRAPHIC: Let’s be reconciled to one another, and in the darkness let’s remember, God is with us and will see us through.**

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.