

Tell Me A Story: About Brothers, Reconciled  
Genesis 45.1-28  
Pentecost +10  
Sunday, August 17, 2014  
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On our annual Lott family visit in Georgia and South Carolina just two weeks ago, I shared with my philosopher brother-in-law that I have been preaching from Genesis all summer. I told him we've been speaking the language of *story* for many weeks now as we have followed the lectionary from the creation poetry of chapter one to the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Ishmael, then Isaac and Rebekah, followed by Jacob and his wives and their baker's dozen family. And now, in our final weeks, we focus on the favorite of Jacob's sons, Joseph. I told him as a student of scripture and a weekly interpreter of these ancient texts, I have found it challenging and rewarding to get out of the New Testament for a while and follow the dark, textured narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. These aren't "three points and a poem" kind of lessons, they require listening, wrestling, conversation, and more listening. I like these stories because they are not easy. To which he replied, "Do you know what Kierkegaard said about the Old Testament?" Then he shared:

"Let others complain that the age is wicked; my complaint is that it is paltry; for it lacks passion. Men's thoughts are thin and flimsy like lace, they are themselves pitiable like the lacemakers. The thoughts of their hearts are too paltry to be sinful. For a worm it might be regarded as a sin to harbor such thoughts, but not for a being made in the image of God. Their lusts are dull and sluggish, their passions sleepy... This is the reason my soul always turns back to the Old Testament and to Shakespeare. I feel that those who speak there are at least human beings: they hate, they love, they murder their enemies, and curse their descendants throughout all generations, they sin."<sup>1</sup>

Even with great tragedy and violence in the news across our country and around the world, we know in our day-to-day lives that it can be said our lusts are dull and sluggish, our passions sleepy. Even in our visceral reactions to tragic global news, little is changed in the ways our lives function. So these stories we visit each week become a different kind of challenge to consider what it means to be fully human; to be

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<sup>1</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

dangerously and wildly alive; to boldly claim that God moves through us and in spite of us; to risk it all and welcome transformation, healing, forgiveness, grace.

There's a huge jump through Genesis between where we left off last week and where we pick up today. The lectionary doesn't take us step by step through Joseph's story as simply reading Genesis does, but instead we fast forward to the point when the brothers meet again. When we read all eight chapters between last week and today, we hear the rise and great success of Joseph. Though his story looks like it should end in the pit, he seems born onto a trajectory of greatness that he himself cannot explain or fully comprehend.

But from Joseph's perspective, the leap from last week to this week in his family saga is just as abrupt for him as it is for us. He doesn't know what happened when the brothers went home. If these young men were willing to kill their brother and settled instead on merely selling him off into an unknown life of slavery, what else were they capable of? Did they kill the baby brother, Benjamin? Did they harm their father? If such jealousy and loathing inspired them all to launch Joseph out of the family, what else were they capable of doing? Far from home, obligated to remain in Egypt, he has lived with these questions, and his questions likely did not imagine a scenario of healing and transformation. Did he hope for grace? Did he hope for repentance? Or did he presume they were all too far gone for that?

The narrative follows Joseph's experiences in Egypt but says nothing of what happens back in Canaan. Jacob, the grieving father, is left refusing to be comforted as the wicked brothers look on. Years later, still in the household and obedient to their father's instructions, ten brothers go to Egypt to buy grain during the famine. We learn as Joseph tests them and drags out his challenges for them, that they have been changed. He sets them up to look like thieves then to lose Benjamin as a second slave. At each test, they are humble and afraid. They are protective of their youngest brother and mindful of their elderly father's broken heart. But this is only teased out through three long chapters before Joseph finally reveals his identity.

I came across one commentator this week who had very little love for Joseph. She did not view these scenes as tests but as cruelty from a power-hungry, arrogant man. Cameron Howard wrote of this character, "Long before HBO had Tony Soprano, the Bible had Joseph, arguably the original bad-guy protagonist." He does play some pretty

terrible tricks on his brothers when he first discovers them as he tries to piece together what has happened in his knowledge gap of their side of the story. He's testing how safe he might feel with them. Testing their character and their story. Are they trustworthy? Are they telling the truth? How can he know? And maybe he takes a little pleasure in making them sweat before he reveals his true identity to them.

But upon hearing his brother Benjamin is safe and well, he cannot control his tears, "overcome with affection for his brother." He has to leave to be alone as he weeps. With each test, he learns something changed forever after the brothers threw Joseph in that pit, and the evil wasn't to be repeated.

"Through [this] series of tests, " writes Cecil Sherman, "Joseph was able to determine the character of his now full-grown, mature brothers. And what he found was encouraging. They were truth-tellers. Where once they had been willing for him to die, now Judah pled for Benjamin. Loyalty had replaced jealousy. Honesty had replaced deceit."<sup>2</sup> All of this is washing over Joseph as the brothers bring the youngest, Benjamin, to meet him.

Joseph weeps upon seeing Benjamin is alive and well. Joseph weeps upon telling his brother's that God preserved him and used his time in Egypt to save them all. And later Joseph weeps upon being reunited with his father, Jacob. The story, so lacking in some details we may want to learn, describes these emotional scenes in full. When Joseph finally tells the truth to his brothers, he cries and hugs and kisses them all.

An unknown poet describes these tears of reconciliation:

When Joseph, crying, hugged and kissed his brothers,  
Did the sun and moon descend and bow before him?  
Did pale white stars explode as supernovas  
When Joseph told each brother, "I forgive"?

Did seven ears of grain become fig-trees?  
Did wine pour down from purple grapes like rain?  
Did birds descend with bread and cakes as tribute?  
Did seven cows stand up and start to dance?

When Joseph wept on his brothers' shoulders,

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<sup>2</sup> Cecil Sherman, *Formations: Genesis-Job*, p. 48

Did frightened snakes retreat into their holes?  
Did sheaves of wheat whisper to each other,  
"Not every Abel has to be a Cain?"

And were his brothers blinded by the light,  
The light distilled from stars and moons and suns,  
The light which Joseph's words and tears ignited,  
Illuminating black Egyptian nights?<sup>3</sup>

Kathryn Shifferdecker notes, "Eventually, the brothers are able to absorb this stunning revelation. Joseph weeps loudly, embracing his brother, Benjamin, and then kissing and weeping over his other brothers. Then, at last, they find their voices. We are left to imagine what they say. Perhaps, like their father Jacob in his own reconciliation with his wronged brother Esau, they speak of seeing the face of God (33:10). Perhaps they say now what they will say to Joseph years later, after Jacob's death: 'Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father' (50:17)."

Maybe that is to say: Forgive us. Oh Joseph, we were fools. We didn't know what we were doing or why we were doing it, and it all went too far. We didn't know how to find your or bring you back. We didn't know our father would weep and grieve as endlessly as he did. We didn't know just how much he loved each one of us. We didn't know how he would protect us and cling to us, terrified he would lose us, too. Forgive us, Joseph, we did not know what we were doing.

"Whatever they say, Joseph reassures them; he urges them to fetch Jacob and to come and live in Egypt, where he will care for them. The scene is one of reconciliation, of forgiveness, and of grace."<sup>4</sup>

If that wraps up with too big a bow and too neat an ending, if it doesn't sit well with us to make peace with brothers who lived most of their lives as enemies, then perhaps it helps to listen to a different voice.

These brothers seem to learn their lesson, "Do not hate, do not envy, do not kill. Be reconcilers, do good in God's name, love well." But it's a story, nonetheless, and we aren't always convinced we can reasonably apply that moral to our own lives.

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<sup>3</sup> Author Unclear: Copyright 2004 Gale, Cengage Learning. All rights reserved.

<sup>4</sup> Kathryn Shifferdecker, [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=121](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=121)

Jesus heard the same responses many years later as he was studying and teaching and interpreting these same texts. “People can’t really live that like, Jesus. How do you expect us to forgive that way, Jesus? “

And Jesus, who desperately wanted his friends to take seriously the ways of God’s kingdom, redirected them. “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor, and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you; in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5:43-45)

The themes of the stories repeat because they want to be lived out in us. We must take that seriously. We must believe that God is still writing this story in our lives, and each tragic moment that breaks our hearts becomes an opportunity for grace to creep in; light shining in the darkness. Friends, “If we can see our lives as instruments in God’s larger designs, we can come to forgive, to do hard service, even to be spent in Christ’s purposes. Often God turns meanness to better and higher ends. And this is happening just as much today as with Joseph and Jesus. Reinterpret life. Find the hand of God in the hard things. If you can do this, you can forgive.”<sup>5</sup>

Walter Brueggemann points to the power of newness in these stories. We profess that ours is a God who makes all things new, and these stories test and stretch the limits of such an absurd proposition.

“The sovereign character of God’s purpose can *create a real newness*, a Genesis, an unextrapolated freshness which negates the past, redefines the present, and opens futures. It is that sovereign quality which permits the family of Jacob to begin again. In our time, where conflicts have raged so deeply, so long ... we find it hard to believe in the possibility of newness. The future seems only a replay of the past. But this narrative makes a tenacious counter-affirmation. The narrative asserts that God’s purpose is *utterly gracious*...The premise of Israel’s faith is that [the LORD] will life for his people. God is remarkably resourceful against every threat of death. No more than Joseph may the listening community abandon our role in life-giving. But our efforts to seek, clutch,

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<sup>5</sup> Cecil Sherman, *Formations: Genesis-Job*, p. 49

and even 'create' life too often ignore God's gracious, singular, and sovereign way with life."<sup>6</sup>

The thing that gets to me in this story, the point at which I get that catch in my throat, is when Joseph and his brothers weep together. The awareness of what is taking place becomes so real, so intense that all they have left are tears. They understand in their bodies, and we know as readers, that everything will be different from that point forward.

We want to believe that people "get" it. When we watch the stories out of Iraq or Syria or Ferguson, Missouri, we want to believe that this is the time people get it. This is the time people will look each other in the eye and see another human rather than a warrior, an enemy, a perpetrator. We want that moment of knowing at such a depth only tears can express the power of the moment.

In his book *Seeing Through Our Tears*, Dan Bagby writes, "Tears express issues. With our tears we express the harmful anger that otherwise would remain locked in our bodies. With tears, we confess our faults and limitations, which gives us opportunity to atone and start over. Tears help us identify our failures, declare fatigue, manage frustration, and confront fear."<sup>7</sup> Sometimes, like Joseph, healing comes not in tests and proof and right confession. It wells up within us until cannot be contained.

When we do not know which step next to take, we are wise to stop and listen. When words fail and tears fall, we listen. What is stirring in us? How might this moment give life to my weary heart? How might this moment give life to the weary world? What is opening up in my story that might welcome newness and grace to a tragic story stuck on repeat? Listen, writes the beloved New England pastor, Buechner:

"You never know what may cause tears. The sight of the Atlantic Ocean can do it, or a piece of music, or a face you've never seen before. A pair of somebody's old shoes can do it. Almost any movie made before the great sadness that came over the world after the Second World War, a horse cantering across a meadow, the high-school basketball team running out onto the gym floor at the start of a game. You can never be sure. But of this you can be sure. Whenever you find tears in your eyes, especially unexpected tears, it is well to pay the closest attention.

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Interpretation: Genesis*, pp. 347-348

<sup>7</sup> Dan Bagby, *Seeing Through Our Tears*, p. 158

They are not only telling you something about the secret of who you are, but more often than not God is speaking to you through them of the mystery of where you have come from and is summoning you to where, if your soul is to be saved, you should go to next.”<sup>8</sup>

Dear Lord, may it be so. Amen.

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<sup>8</sup> Frederick Buechner, ~originally published in *Whistling in the Dark* and later in *Beyond Words*