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First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28

“Finding God in Unexpected Places: In the Pit”

We're in the 6th and final week of my mini series on stories from Genesis. Today we're wrapping it up with the story of Joseph, Jacob's oldest son with his wife Rachel. As a reminder, we've looked at the story of Abraham and Sarah, their son Isaac, Abraham's maid Hagar and their son Ishmael, and Isaac's twin sons Jacob and Esau

One thing all of these stories have in common is dysfunctional families. Some people may be very surprised to learn that these families are not role models of good old fashioned family values. The Bible makes no attempt to cover up the fact that Jacob was a crook and a cheat; that Abraham nearly killed his son Isaac, or that Esau and Jacob taunted one another for almost their entire lives.

In fact, one of the sub themes running throughout the Genesis stories is how favoritism of one child over another can lead to anger, resentment and even murder. Long before Jacob and Esau's rivalry, we had Cain and Abel; Cain killed Abel because he resented the Lord looking favorably upon Abel. Sarah was jealous of the relationship Abraham had with Hagar, so she made Abraham banish Hagar and their son Ishmael. Isaac favored Esau, but his wife Rebecca favored Jacob . . .and their favoritism caused all sorts of strife in that family. And today we hear that Jacob favors Joseph, his oldest son with Rachel, his favored wife.

From just about every vantage point, it appears that what comes around, goes around.

When we enter Joseph's story today, he's 17, a shepherd to his father's flock, and very arrogant. He tells his Dad that two of his brothers are lazy, and then goes on to tell his 11 brothers that in his dreams, he's the

boss of them. Apparently, no one told Joseph that no one likes a tattletale, nor was he told that the unspoken rule of siblings is that you never, ever, under any circumstances snitch on your brother or sister to your Mom or Dad. Because doing so can and probably will lead to torment. And it's just not worth it in the long run.

Apparently, no one ever told Joseph that, because not only does Joseph snitch on his brothers, he also wears a fancy coat right in front of them that just screams out "I am our Father's favorite." His coat is the kind of coat princes or kings would wear, and it's a visible sign to anyone within a 100-mile radius that he's top dog.

But it's a dog-eat-dog world, you know, and one day his brothers have *had enough*. When they see him coming, which is easy to do with that fancy schmancy sport coat, they decide to kill him. The dreams, the coat . . . it's all too much, so they conspire to throw him into a pit and let the wild animals devour him.

Until Reuben, the oldest brother, attempts to put a lame stop to the scheme. So instead of killing Joseph, they sell him to a bunch of Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver, and the Ishmaelites then take him to Egypt.

This is where today's story ends. It's a nasty story filled with favoritism, sibling rivalry and jealousy. (But) No matter how narcissistic Joseph is, no one, no one deserves what he endures. The way his brothers treat him is despicable. After selling Joseph into slavery, his brothers smear goat's blood all over his famous coat and then show it to their father Jacob and lie to him that his beloved son is dead.

How God can possibly bring peace and harmony to this family is a wonder, but God does bring peace and harmony. Hate, violence and evil will not be the final word. Love and forgiveness will be the final word in this family's saga.

Jumping ahead a few chapters, word spreads of Joseph's reputation as a good interpreter of dreams. When the Pharaoh has a dream he needs

interpreted, he called Joseph. Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dream as a sign that there would be seven years of great crops/harvest and then seven years of famine. The Pharaoh was impressed, so he put Joseph in charge of getting ready for the famine. Joseph did his job so well he became the Pharaoh's right-hand man.

When the famine came, it devastated Egypt as well as Canaan, where Joseph's father and brothers lived, and they suffered terribly because of the famine. So when they heard there was food in Egypt, Jacob, Joseph's father, sent some of his sons there. When the sons appeared before Joseph, he recognized his brothers, but they didn't recognize him. So in a series of incidents, Joseph put his brothers through some tests—probably to find out whether or not they had really changed.

After one of the tests, his brothers show up in Egypt again, but this time with his brother Benjamin. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he can't control himself any longer and he cries out in love, weeping so loudly that everyone in the Pharaoh's palace can hear him. Instead of anger and fear, the brothers receive forgiveness. Instead of death or jail, the brothers receive welcoming words and the promise of a new life together and food for the remainder of the famine.

In this story of betrayal, jealousy, and anger, we learn something very important about revenge and forgiveness. We learn that while revenge is a dish best served cold, as they say, it eventually muddies all waters, clouds hope, and destroys the possibility of community. Despite what the saying says that revenge is sweet, in the end, it's just not very good for you. Those years which Joseph spent in slavery and prison could have been the occasion for a slow burn that might have ignited into an explosion of anger at the sight of his brothers. But unresolved anger only leads to bitterness, hostility, and revenge, while forgiveness leads to freedom and reconciliation.

Joseph's response is an illogical burst of forgiveness and love for this family that has only known betrayal and deceit and favoritism, and not only in their nuclear family but among their ancestors, too. But this is how God acts, in illogical bursts of forgiveness and love. Instead of teaching the brothers that "what comes around, goes around", God

brings around what has not gone around. Instead of an eye for an eye, God heals the weary eye. Instead of retribution for what is due, God offers forgiveness.

Someone once said, “Keeping score of old scores and scars, getting even and one-upping, always makes you less than you are.” And another person went on to say, “Forgiveness does not change the past, but it does enlarge the future.” When Joseph saw his brothers, not only did he offer them forgiveness, he also found solace for himself.

In his book Forgive and Forget: Healing the Hurts We Don't Deserve, Louis Smedes advises that the most effective way of curing our hurts and our grudges is through forgiveness. Forgiveness means letting go of the past. We may want to get back at those who harmed us, but even if we do, we will never be satisfied. Forgiving someone doesn't mean everything that happened to you is now OK; instead it allows you to move forward with your life without the weight of what happened to you holding on to you like a lead brick.

Friends, forgiveness isn't pretending nothing happened. Forgiveness is refusing to let the worst thing that happened have the final word.

Our life is brief. Why allow it to become a collection of hurts and grudges? A wise author offers us this counsel in forgiving those who have done us wrong:

In the very depths of your soul, dig a grave.
Let it be as some forgotten spot to which no path leads;
And there, in the eternal silence, bury the wrongs which you have
suffered.
Your heart will feel as if a load has fallen from it.

Joseph isn't a story about pretending wounds don't exist. It's a story about what happens after years of betrayal, when forgiveness becomes possible.

We are living in a time when forgiveness feels almost naïve. Our culture rewards outrage. Social media teaches us to keep score. Politics tells us that if someone is on the other side, they are not simply mistaken—they are the enemy. Families have stopped gathering for holidays because they no longer know how to talk to one another. Friendships have quietly disappeared. We've become very good at drawing lines and very poor at building bridges.

Joseph knew something about broken families. His family didn't merely disagree around the dinner table. His brothers sold him into slavery and told their father he was dead. If anyone had a right to hold a grudge, it was Joseph.

Louis Smedes once wrote,

"To forgive is to set a prisoner free and discover that the prisoner was you."

That's what happened to Joseph. We often imagine that Joseph's brothers were the ones set free. And they were. But so was Joseph. Every year he carried that betrayal, it imprisoned him as much as it imprisoned them. When he embraced his brothers, he wasn't saying what they did was acceptable. He was refusing to let it define the rest of his life.

The deceit and anger that plagued their family for generations was lifted. And just like those dreams Joseph interpreted for everyone, God offered Joseph and his family a new interpretation of life which was marked by grace, forgiveness, and love.

In these Genesis stories, we keep hearing that God keeps showing up in unexpected places.

God shows up in a pit.

God shows up in dysfunctional families.

God shows up in Pharaoh's palace.

And finally, God shows up in reconciliation.

Friends, Joseph's greatest miracle isn't that he became Egypt's prime minister.

It's that he became the kind of man who could embrace the very brothers who destroyed his life.

In a world that increasingly tells us to cut people off, cancel them, and keep score forever, Joseph bears witness to another way. Forgiveness does not erase justice. It does not erase memory. But it does refuse to let hatred become the last chapter of the story.

That, it seems to me, is a word that our country needs to hear right now.

no matter how much anger, jealousy or desire for revenge we hold, God will not let that be the final word. We see that in the story of Joseph, just as we see it in the story of Jesus. Love and forgiveness are the final word. And that is God's hope and dream for us, and for God's world.

May it always be so.

Amen.