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Genesis 37: 1-4, 12:-28, with Genesis 45

### **“Joseph and His Amazing Coat”**

We're in the 6th and final week of my series on stories from the Bible everyone should know. We started with the story of creation, where we learned that God calls us to continue the work of creation by building a world that gives people hope; we then heard the story of the call of Abraham, the first patriarch, and learned we need to put our trust in God. We heard the very difficult story of Abraham's near fatal sacrifice of Isaac, and learned that God can and will ask us to make sacrifices. In the story of Jacob and Esau, we learned that God's love isn't based on who we are or what we did or didn't do or how good we've been or how bad we've been, God loves us just because that's who God is. And last week we heard the story of Jacob wrestling with God, and learned that it's OK to struggle with God. It's OK to have a “dark night of the soul”; it doesn't mean you're bad or unfaithful; in fact, if anything, the story teaches us that struggling with God will result in a blessing.

Today we're wrapping up the series and the book of Genesis with the story of Joseph, Jacob's eldest son with his wife Rachel.

One thing all of these stories have in common is dysfunctional families. Some people may be very surprised that these families are not good models of good old fashioned family values. The Bible makes no attempt to cover up the fact that Jacob was a crook and cheat, that Abraham nearly killed his son Isaac, or Noah drank too much.

In fact, one of the sub themes running throughout these stories is how favoritism of one child over another can lead to anger, resentment and even murder. For example, God loved Abel more than Cain, which cause Cain to kill Abel. Abraham favored Isaac, which caused Abraham to banish his son Ishmael whom he fathered with Hagar. 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 eldest 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 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 and therefore probably the responsible one, 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.

After Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt, word spreads of his reputation as a good interpreter of dreams. When the Pharaoh has a dream he needs interpreted, he calls Joseph. Joseph interpreted his dream as a sign that there were going to 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 was not only in Egypt, but also in Canaan where Joseph’s father and brothers lived. When they heard there was food in Egypt, Jacob, Joseph’s father, sent some of his sons there. When they appeared before Joseph, he recognized them, but they did not recognize him. In a series of incidents, Joseph put his brothers through some tests—probably to discover 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. But Joseph doesn’t cry out in rage, he cries out in love-weeping so loudly 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 provided with sustenance for the remainder of the famine.

In this story of betrayal, jealousy, and anger, we learn something very important about forgiveness. Remembering Joseph means reminding ourselves that even in the most

deeply troubled family or relationship that has experienced unimaginable rupture, that forgiveness and healing are possible.

Joseph's response is an illogical burst of forgiveness and love for this family who 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.

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.*

There's an old folk tale about a man who was a baker, and he was known in the village for his self-righteousness. He was a very righteous man. His wife respected her husband, loved him too, as much as he would allow, but over time her heart began to ache for something more than his worthy righteousness. So it happened that one day the baker came home to find his wife in the arms of a stranger. All the village assumed that the righteous baker would throw her out on the street, but he said, "Oh no, the Good Book tells me not to do that. I will keep her at home."

Yet he could not forgive her in his heart for bringing shame upon their family. As time passed, his feelings grew angrier and more brittle. After a while, notice was taken of this in the high heavenly places, and every time he felt bitterness toward his wife, an angel would fly down from heaven and deposit a tiny pebble in his heart, and he would feel a little stab of pain. As the days passed, the pebbles multiplied, until soon he was bent over with the weight of them. Then one night the angel came to.

"Nothing can change what she did," the man protested.

"You are right," the angel answered.

"You cannot change the past, but you can heal the past."

“How?” the baker asked.  
“Just look with new eyes.”

So the baker began to try to see his wife in a new way. Mysteriously, every time he tried, she became transformed into the woman he came to love again. But something else mysterious happened; the man also became transformed. Day by day, the angel lifted the stones out of his heart, and love moved back into his heart. Together the two of them began a journey into a new season of life, a journey of love, healing, and reconciliation.  
*["The Magic Eyes, A Little Fable" from FORGIVE AND FORGET by Louis B. Smedes. Copyright © 1984 by Louis B. Smedes. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.]*

Joseph and his brothers entered a new season of life, too. The deceit and anger that plagued their family for generations was lifted, just like the pebbles out of the baker's heart. 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.

At the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis there hangs a plaque beneath the balcony where Martin Luther King Jr. was shot. The words inscribed on it come from Joseph's story: “Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him . . .and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” The effect is chilling.

No matter the anger, jealousy or desire for revenge we hold, God will not let the dream die. 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. It is God's hope and dream for us, and for God's world.

May it always be so.

Amen.