

June 3 – Betrayed

Genesis 37:12-36

Last week we left Joseph having shared dreams about his superiority with his brothers and father. Jacob and his sons were upset with Joseph for sharing such dreams with them. The brothers, even before hearing about the dreams, disliked Joseph for the way their father, Jacob, spoiled him, and for his tattling on them. Today we will see what happens when the pride of Joseph, the favoritism by father Jacob, and the jealousy of the brothers mix. It is a toxic brew.

No one is free from blame in the incidents that follow. Jacob had to have known that there was bad blood between the brothers. You can't hide that kind of thing. Yet, he sends Joseph alone to check on his brothers. Jacob would have known that his other sons would not take kindly to this. After all, one other time Joseph had come home and given a less than favorable report concerning what his brothers were doing. Yet he sends him. Is this the gullibility of a father who cannot believe his sons would be anything but nice to each other? Is this the plan of a father for reconciliation believing that if you let the brothers have some time together they will work things out? We don't know why Jacob did this, but sending Joseph alone to visit his brothers places him in a vulnerable spot. The brothers see Joseph coming and their hatred for him boils over. It doesn't help that he is wearing that special coat that reminds them he is the favorite one. They are so jealous that they plan to kill Joseph to end the possibility of his dreams coming to fruition.

Again, we need to remember that people of this time thought dreams were from God. Getting rid of the dreamer was also an attack on God who had sent the dream they so detested. They would not have seen it this way, but culturally, they were turning their back on God not in just doing the repugnant thing of killing a brother but in rejecting God's vision for all of their lives. Reuben, the oldest and therefore the one who is to act for his father, intervenes. He suggested throwing Joseph into a dry well. It says that he planned to rescue Joseph later and restore him to their father. Would he have really done this?. Restoring him would have been catastrophic for the rest of the brothers. Imagine Jacob's response if Joseph told him about being attacked and cast

into a dry well by his brothers. It is likely all of them would have been disinherited. More likely Reuben would he have left him there and let the harsh desert do the nasty work for them. This way they would not have technically been guilty of murder.

We will never know if Reuben would have risked taking Joseph out of the dry well and returning him home because, while he is gone, Judah suggests that they sell Joseph into slavery. They will get rid of the dreamer and make some money on the side. They don't realize it, but in doing so they actually are working towards the fulfillment of the dreams not against them. All the brothers, it is assumed, agree to this plan except Reuben who was gone and Benjamin, the youngest, who would have been too young to be out with the sheep. We learn that Joseph, after being sold to the Midianites, is later sold to Potiphar, a high ranking official in the court of Pharaoh. Now that Joseph is out of their life forever, or so they believe, there is a problem. What do they tell their father when Joseph does not return home? The brothers conspire to hide the deed by lying to Jacob. They take that special coat, rip it and then dip it in sheep's blood. They present the bloody evidence assuming that father will make the correct deduction that Joseph has been killed by a wild animal. Jacob, sometimes called the deceiver because he had deceived his father to earn his birthright, is deceived. Or is he? It says that he refuses to be comforted. Jewish law prescribes a specific period for mourning. Saying he refused to be comforted has led some Jewish sages to offer this idea, "The reason Jacob continually mourns the loss of Joseph is because he knows his sons have some culpability for Joseph's disappearance."

Joseph the pampered is now a slave. What did Joseph feel as he walked in chains towards Egypt? We have all experienced betrayal just as he did. Did Joseph feel only anger at his brothers for the way they treated him or did he feel guilt as he reflected on his actions? Did he think about how his telling them about his dreams, his snitching on them, his wearing that fancy coat in front of them had led to this? Not likely. Remember, we have a 17 year old here and probably at this time all he could do is rage against his brothers. It is going to take some time and life experiences before he is mature enough to see a bigger picture.

The first question this part of Joseph's story makes we want to ask is: "What do we do with our moments of betrayal?" Now, most of us will not know the kind of betrayal Joseph faced, but we have been let down by friends, disappointed by family, even had the occasional stab in the back at work. What do we do with these times? Do we plot to get revenge? Do we create a tough shell around us to protect us from being hurt? Do we lash out in anger letting the other know how much they have hurt us? Do we spread stories of our betrayal hoping that those who hear it will turn on our betrayer? These are all common enough actions. But what should we do? Jesus told us to pray for those who persecute us, forgive 70 times 7 and more. The way of Jesus is a hard one, but with prayer, practice and a bit of maturity we can move from lashing out to living faithfully. Part of the Joseph story will be a story of growth. Part of our story of faith is learning to let go of the hurt of betrayal and replace it with grace and forgiveness. So, if you are still angry over some form of betrayal that has happened to you, perhaps today is the day to finally release it. Ask God to help you let it go and replace it with tolerance and maybe even forgiveness.

The other question this part of the story of Joseph brings up for me, and it is a hard one, is this, "Where have I acted like the brothers?" By that I mean, when have I conspired against someone because I wanted to be first? Or conspired because I convinced myself that the good of many is more important than the needs of this individual. Where have I let jealousy dictate my actions? Where have I let my own agendas take over not caring if it hurts another? Or, where have I stood back and done nothing to help another who was in need, knowing that by my silence I am being complicit in the actions of the group. I am sure that some of the brothers were not in total agreement about selling Joseph into slavery, but it was easier to remain silent. I have to confess that when I examine my life I see some of the brother's reactions towards Joseph in some of my dealings with others.

When you begin to think about these questions and apply them to your life you begin to understand that they are not easy questions to answer because life is, as I often say, very messy and does not come with clear-cut answers. Let me share a time in my life that I still wrestle with. I was chair of the personnel committee for one of our church camps. We were struggling with the job performance of our director. After many

remedial discussions, where nothing changed, the committee decided that we should not renew his contract. This action was to be confirmed at the all district meeting in a couple of weeks. The day of the meeting there were fifty people present. We were usually lucky to get twenty at a meeting. During the next hour person after person came forward to express support for the director and the work he was doing. They implied that the personnel committee had conspired against him, that we had ulterior motives for getting rid of him. The director was my friend before this and now he would not talk to me. Finally, when the vote came, our motion for dismissal was turned down. In all fairness to him, I resigned from the personnel committee believing that he needed a chair that was supportive of him. Most saw this as my being childish and picking up my toys and going home if I could not have it my way. To this day I wonder what would have been best in that situation. How could I have handled things differently? Was I acting like one of the brothers using the power I had as chair arbitrarily? Was I wanting him gone because he would not run the camp as I thought it should be run? Were my actions pure and for the best of the camp, as I believed at the time? Were others right in seeing an ulterior motive? I still, many years later, am not clear as to how to answer those questions. I believe I did what was right and best, and yet I wonder. As it was, the director only stayed a few more months. I think he realized that even though he had won that battle he did not have a lot of support, so took a job at another camp.

God by name, has still has not entered the story of Joseph. This shows me that God is present even when we don't acknowledge it, and that when we are working against God, often our actions don't really work. The brothers wanted to end the dream but instead fostered it. They wanted to remove Joseph from the affection of their father and now Jacob has wrapped his love in grief and proclaims he will never let it go. They are worse off than when they began and have to deal with their lies and deceit as well. Whenever we push our agenda, not caring who gets hurt, we have relived the story of the brothers in the desert.

We are called to be patient, tolerant and be more aware of how God is at work before we just do things our way. May we learn from Joseph's life and find a more grace filled way for our own.