

*Grace and peace to you in God who has chosen and redeemed us,
who forgives all our sins and holds us in everlasting love.*

What a difficult story we read today.
A story of jealousy and resentment,
of murderous intent and extreme consequences.
One of those stories that makes us wonder what it is doing in our scripture.

The part of the story we read today needs context.
This is the story of Joseph – you may know it –
from Sunday School or Bible study
or from Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat – the musical.
Joseph is a son of Jacob, whose story we explored last week.
Joseph is the first son born to Rachel, Jacob's beloved wife,
after his other wife and concubines have had ten sons.
(and at least one daughter, but that's another story)

Joseph is the favorite, cherished and spoiled by his father.
And Joseph is blessed with dreams of foretelling –
dreams which will play a large role in the course of his life.
As a boy, Joseph dreams that all his older brothers will bow down to him.
And he shares the dream with them – a little brother move, to be sure,
but not a wise move.
The brothers are enraged – by his dream, by the extravagant, expensive cloak
his father buys for him.
And they plan violence against him.

So we read today about him being thrown into a pit, and sold into slavery.
He becomes a slave in Egypt, where he ends up in prison,
but telling his true sight dreams earns him an audience with pharaoh.
Eventually, as you may remember,
he becomes one of the highest officials of pharaoh, working to prepare
the land for the famine which his dreams have foretold.

And here is where the brothers return on the scene.
They are experiencing famine as well, and hearing that there is food in Egypt,
they travel there to beg for food for their family.
The court official they meet is their brother, Joseph,
but of course they do not recognize him.

Years ago, renowned Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann wrote about
the stories of Genesis that they portray to us the Problem of the Brother.
The problem that life is not fair, and even God seems unfair in these stories,
choosing brother over brother for favor.
We all live with the problem of the brother.
Whether literal brothers and sisters, or the siblings all around us,
we compare ourselves and see that life is unfair.
That some are wealthy while others lack food for each day, lack health care,
lack a home to lay their head.
It's easy to get caught up in jealousy and blame,
and it's all too common for those feelings to lead to harm
In personal relationships and, as we see so clearly right now,
at a societal level
the problem of the brother is playing out all around us.

The story of Joseph concludes with a complex scene of reconciliation.
At first, when his brothers bow before him in supplication,
Joseph toys with them.
He imprisons them.
He sends them home to bring Benjamin, Rachel's only other son,
back with them,
Then plants a cup in Benjamin's bags to frame him as a thief.

Professor Kathryn Schifferdecker writes,

Why does Joseph do all this? Perhaps he is seeking revenge, and who could blame him? But there is another explanation: That is, perhaps Joseph wants to test his brothers, to see if they have changed.

And here is where the story takes a significant turn. Because while the story has been focused primarily on Joseph, the “chosen” one, it now shifts its focus to Judah, one of the many older sons who is not their father’s favorite. How will the “unchosen” brother react this time? Judah was the one who suggested selling Joseph into slavery in the first place. Now he could do the same with the other favorite son, Benjamin, and bear no guilt for it. Will he respond to “the problem of the brother” by again getting rid of the brother?

No. Instead, Judah gives perhaps one of the most moving speeches in Genesis. Appealing to Joseph, though he doesn’t know it’s Joseph, Judah explains how much Benjamin means to their father, and then offers himself in Benjamin’s place:

“Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy’s life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die....For I, your servant, became surety for the boy to my father, saying, ‘If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.’ Now therefore, please let me, your servant remain in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father.”
([Genesis 44:30-34](#))

Judah has learned through many hard years that the problem of the brother is not solved through bitterness or violence. Instead, Judah’s love for his father and the promise he made to him overwhelm any envy he might feel for the chosen son, and he offers himself in the boy’s stead.

It is this love and devotion that finally move Joseph to reveal himself: “I am Joseph,” he cries, “I am your brother Joseph.” And this long-separated group of brothers weep together and talk with one another.

That scene moves me every time I read it, Schifferdecker concludes. It is the beautiful culmination of a long story full of jealousy and betrayal, a story of the problem of the brother. But it ends with reconciliation

Yet that is not the end.

As they become reconciled to one another, Joseph sees the hand of God at work.

If he was not in Egypt, with power over the storehouses of food,

where would his brothers turn for help?

And he tells them, what you intended for harm, God has used for good.

Joseph chooses to place his story in the larger context of God's story,

God's plan for his life and his family,

to see his good fortune in Egypt as a gift from God.

It is important to note here that Joseph is not saying that God did harm to him

so that it might all turn out this way.

Joseph is not saying that everything happens for a reason.

His brothers did a bad thing to him,

a harm outside of God's intention for any person.

But God used all the circumstances of Joseph's life

to bring good from all that happened to him.

People experience terrible things in this life –

people do terrible things to one another –

and it is not willed by God, or part of God's plan.

And, God's Spirit can come into each life,

into the pain and trauma of our lives, and make something new.

God can bring healing and wholeness.

God's Spirit can bring reconciliation where there is animosity

Generosity where there is greed

Contentment and gratitude where there is jealousy

Hope where there seems to be no hope.

When we see our stories as part of God's great story

of love for and reconciliation with God's creation,

We can see that what harm is done to us, what harm we do,

can be transformed by God for good in the world.

A few weeks ago I was at a retreat with indigenous author and activist
Kaitlin Curtice, and she led us in an exercise about reconciliation.
We stood in a circle, and each of us held the end of a string,
with someone across the circle holding the other end.
It created a beautiful web – the web of connections that exist between us,
and between us and Creator and the creation.
Then we cut the strings.
These cuts represented the harms we do to one another. And we all stood
holding a string that connected to nothing.
Each isolated in our place around the circle.
Then Kaitlin told us to find a partner and tied our strings together,
and again we stood around the circle, connected by a web.
But the web had changed.
Where there had been smooth strings, we now had knots –
Knots of all kinds, big and small, neat and messy.
We were connected again, she showed us, but things had changed.
The harm was not erased.
Connection was made new, but different.

Tomorrow is indigenous People's Day in this nation, and it is a good time to
think more deeply about reconciliation and repair.
We at All Saints have participated in the ELCA's Truth and Healing commission,
where we have done education to raise awareness of the history
and harm done to our native siblings.
We say a land acknowledgement in our worship,
not to pat ourselves on the back for being such good white allies,
but to remind ourselves of that history,
and of our need to continue our work of reconciliation and repair.
I hope each of you will join me on this journey of learning, of acknowledging,
and of seeking relationships of mutuality and care
with our indigenous neighbors.
This coming Friday, Judy Messal and I will be attending the Feast Day at NACA
- the Native American Community Academy –
as we continue to build relationship with the school and its supporters.

The problem of the brother – the sister –
 maybe I'd say the problem of the neighbor.
We live in a world with so much division, mistrust, and harm.
Reconciliation and repair is never easy.
But it is the work we are called to as followers of Christ.

To paraphrase today's gospel, we may ask Jesus,
 Lord, how many times must we seek reconciliation with our neighbors?
 Seven times? Ten times? Maybe once a week?
And our Lord replies, seventy times seven times you are to seek repair.
When you follow me, you walk the good road of reconciliation and healing
 each and every day.

That is our responsibility, and it is also our blessing.
To walk the good road with our savior,
 Who loves and forgives us, who reconciles us to God each day
 and calls us to do the same in our lives.
Thanks be to God. Amen.