

Is the future predetermined, or can it be changed? Are you shackled by the events of the past, or can you forge a new path in the future?

Last week, we heard the beginning of the story of Joseph. Joseph and his brothers are part of a very dysfunctional family system. We've been reading about this family all summer in Genesis. For 4 generations, the family of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and his sons, have been masters of the dark arts of favoritism and deceit. They were trapped in a never-ending cycle of bad behavior from generation to generation. The question for them: Is there any way out? Will they be trapped in the same destructive pattern forever?

And that's a question for us, too. Often times our families have unhealthy patterns that perpetuate themselves. Is there any way out? For an answer, let's return to the story of Joseph.

Last week, in Genesis 37, we found that Joseph was a rather snotty 17-year-old with 10 older brothers. Their father, Jacob, had sired children with 4 different women. But Joseph's mother was Jacob's favorite wife, and thus Joseph became Jacob's favorite son. This creates jealousy amongst the 10 older brothers. Joseph is given a long robe with sleeves, which is a symbol of power and authority. His 10 older brothers would certainly have objected to that thought. To make matters worse, Joseph keeps having dreams which symbolically show his brothers bowing down before him. This doesn't earn him any brownie points with them either.

Eventually the ten get fed up. They sell Joseph into slavery, and then they fake his death and tell their father that he had been killed by a wild animal.

In the chapters between last week and this week, there are a number of things that happen to Joseph.

He ends up as a slave in Egypt.

He's a hard worker and eventually gets promoted to be the chief slave in the household.

His master's wife tries to seduce him, and when that fails, she falsely accuses him of rape, and Joseph is thrown into prison.

In prison he correctly interprets dreams of two of Pharaoh's servants.

A couple years later he is summoned to interpret dreams for Pharaoh.

Joseph predicts that there are going to be 7 years of plenteous harvests followed by 7 years of famine.

That day, Pharaoh puts Joseph in charge of the Egyptian granaries and makes him his second-in-command. And sure enough, there are 7 years of record harvests, just as Joseph said. Then the famine begins.

Then Joseph's 10 older brothers come to Egypt wanting to buy food from Joseph. 20 years have elapsed since they sold Joseph into slavery. They don't recognize who he is. But he knows them.

20 years earlier, the brothers had been powerful and Joseph had been powerless. Now the tables have turned. Joseph holds all the cards.

And Joseph's reaction tells us a lot about what he's been doing for the past 20 years. Joseph could have been nursing a grudge. He could have been on a slow burn for 20 years. The surprise of his brothers' visit could have been the spark that ignited a firestorm of anger and revenge.

But apparently Joseph has been able to make some accommodation with the past. He doesn't react in with anger. He doesn't lash out in righteous rage against his brothers, which he had the power to do very easily with no repercussions. He was Pharaoh's XO. He could have acted with impunity. But Joseph chooses a course other than vengeance.

He begins a rather elaborate testing procedure to see if his older brothers have changed. It gives them an opportunity to admit their fault.

In the end, the bottom line is this:

1. The brothers show tremendous sorrow and repentance about the way they had treated Joseph in the past. They're genuine about their repentance. It's not just a show.
2. They show by their actions that they've changed. They are now willing to defend Benjamin, their youngest brother. They're willing to sacrifice themselves on his behalf. That's 180° different than they acted towards Joseph.

At the end of our reading last week, they had gotten rid of Joseph. This caused their father tremendous pain, and they didn't seem to give a flying flip about it. But now, right before our lesson this morning, Judah sums it up by saying that if anything were to happen to Benjamin, "I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."¹ The brothers have turned around completely in the past 20 years.

The ingredients for reconciliation are there. Joseph has made peace with the past without forgetting it. And the brothers have acted with repentance for the wrongs they had done. Which brings us to our OT lesson today from Genesis 45. This is the climax of the story. This is the moment that Joseph reveals himself.

As our lesson begins, Joseph is overcome with emotion, and he sends all of the Egyptians out of the room. He's so moved that he begins to weep. And then, he drops the bombshell: "I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?"

¹ Gen 44:34

And then there's the great line: "But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence."

The brothers had written Joseph off as gone. But in the meantime, they had been feeling guilty about what they had done. They saw the trauma it caused their father. They later felt that God was punishing them for what they had done to Joseph. And the question had to be there? Is Joseph mad at us? What will he do to us?

Then Joseph says, "Come closer to me." That distance, that break in their relationship is still there. And Joseph is seeking to heal it. He says, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt."

Notice the words there. He's not denying what they've done. It was a horrible thing. He's naming it, and not sweeping it under the rug. He's acknowledging their sin honestly.

But then he says, "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." The message is amazing. Joseph is telling them, in essence what he says later in ch50: "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve numerous people."²

In other words, 'You've done something evil, but God has taken it and made something good come of it. You may have sold me into slavery in Egypt, but God has turned things around so that now, in spite of your evil actions, you and our whole family will be saved. And not only that, God is going to save lots of Egyptians from starvation also.' He sums it up by concluding: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God." God took the worst they could dish out, and brought something good out of it.

Joseph could easily have acted with vengeance. He had almost total earthly power. But his earthly power could not heal his broken relationships with his brothers. Instead, it took giving up that earthly power, sending his entourage out, and being open and vulnerable with his brothers. In doing so, Joseph is acting in a very Christ-like way. And in doing so, the breach is healed. We're told that "he kissed all his brothers and wept upon them; and after that his brothers talked with him."

Life can be hard. Oftentimes, we're beset by troubles we don't deserve. Certainly, that's the case with Joseph. He was dealt some terrible blows. Sold into slavery. Falsely imprisoned. Separated from those he loved. But looking back prayerfully, he saw the hand of God at work in his life.

We don't always know what God intends. We don't get to see the big picture. Life can be overwhelming at times. The secret is to put our trust in God. God can bring good out of the worst of circumstances. God's goodness is stronger than any evil that might beset us.

² Gen 50:20

Last weekend while I was on vacation, we saw a very public resurgence of evil on the streets of Charlottesville, Virginia. We saw Nazis and white supremacists marching by torchlight like some demented time warp of events from the 1930's and 40's.

Because I was ordained in 1995, I have been a priest during that time that many in the WWII generation have been dying of old age. Thus in the past 22 years I have had the honor to preside at a fairly large number of funerals for veterans of the Second World War. These were men who risked their lives to fight Nazism, men who saw comrades fall in order to free the world from this ideological stain. Renee and I have both personally buried grandfathers who went to war in the 1940's and fought against these barbaric and repugnant ideas.

So I was angry to see the public resurgence of these evil ideas being promulgated. These supremacist ideas belong on the trash heap of history. They are contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And they must be vigorously opposed in the market place of ideas.

And as you're well aware, there has been quite a bit of turmoil in our nation in the aftermath of Charlottesville.

The question for us, the place where the rubber meets the road, is do we truly believe that God can take actions that were intended for evil, and bring about good?

I believe he can. At this point, I won't pretend to know exactly how that can happen. I'm not going to pretend I have all the answers. I'm not going to stand here and tell you I have a simple solution. But I firmly believe God can bring good things out of this demonstration of evil in our midst.

In the midst of the terrible events of the Civil War, at the dedication of a cemetery for fallen warriors at Gettysburg, Abraham Lincoln resolved "that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom."

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I believe we have experienced some of that new birth of freedom in the past. We have made great progress in working toward the ideals of liberty and justice for all.

But I also believe that the events of last weekend demonstrate that we also have a way to go. We have not achieved our goals as a nation.

But under God, I do firmly believe, it is possible. You intended it for evil. God intended it for good. God can bring good out of this situation. You intended it for crucifixion and death. God can bring resurrection and life.

In a few moments we will gather at God's table. We will break the bread and share the cup. We proclaim Jesus' death and resurrection. And we are fed so that we can go out and be agents of resurrection and life in our hurting nation, in our troubled world.

We pray that God will send us out to do his work in the world.

At 8:00 after communion we (will pray/prayed) for God to "assist us with (his) grace, that we may... do all such good works as (he) has prepared for us to walk in."

At 10:30 after communion we will pray for God to "grant us strength and courage to love and serve (him)."

Both prayers mean we have work to do.

Others may have intended evil. But let us work to be agents of God's love.