

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. Dr. David Pettit  
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Genesis 37: 1-30

Joseph is young. He recounts his dreams, without cognizance of how these dreams might be threatening to others. Even his father, who loved Joseph the most, rebuked him, saying, “are we all, even your father and mother, really going to bow down to you, to be under your authority.” You see, such dreams, in the ancient Near East, were not merely childish fantasies, but a manner in which the divine will was often revealed. And these dreams tell of an upending of the order, a break of tradition and norms and expectations, as the younger Joseph envisions ruling over his father and his older brothers.

But while Jacob rebuked Joseph, his brothers came to despise him. They did not share Jacob’s special love for Joseph. They did not like being dishonored, or shamed by his boastful recounting of his dreams. And Joseph’s special place in his father’s eyes, and his being recipient to his father’s special gifts, and his dreams of greatness, this was all an offense to his brothers, and it was all threatened their own place, it all bore ramifications for their places within the household. And Jacob’s sons were not immune to avenging for dishonor.

Genesis 34, a few chapters earlier, tells of how Jacob’s sons slaughtered the Shechemites. Their sister was united with a Shechemite in what was not a traditional union/marriage, in that did not involve the families, and a bride price, and dowry – it was lacking the honor of a marriage. They took it as offense, as an act of dishonor. So, they negotiate a concession for the offense – that all the men of Shechem will be circumcised, by this the men of Shechem showing the willingness to be unified with Jacob’s people. And while these grown men are compromised from their surgical procedures, Jacob’s sons kill them. Dishonor leading to bloodshed. It has become part of their heritage. But with Joseph, this is the first time they have considered murdering their own blood; their own brother.

It is Reuben whose conscience is sensitive enough still to know how repugnant and objectionable this proposal is, the proposal to murder their own brother. He has not become so desensitized by the principles of honor and violence, so that he is still able to be shocked. Reuben speaks up. Reuben proposes a lesser evil that in turn saves Joseph’s life. Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him.... So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in

it.” Reuben intends to rescue him quietly later, but is too late. By the time he comes to rescue, Joseph is gone.

As we have been following the story of Jacob this summer, I am reminded how the larger story and trajectory of scripture is embodied and illustrated in the story of Jacob and his family. It is a story of God choosing a person to bless and work through for his purposes and plans, a story of God seeking good, of mapping a different course, and how human sin and brokenness keeps making its way in. It is a pattern that will eventually lead to Jesus, to God seeking a redemptive path in the heart and through Christ, not dependent on human actions. Symborska’s poem is a sober reminder of our humanness, as she summarizes our patterns in the language of statistics, while also highlighting our common mortality and our worthiness of empathy. This is a repeated story in scripture. God’s good intentions for humanity, met by humanity’s stubborn patterns.

But there is another theme that runs throughout scripture as well. It is the theme of community, of justice, of loving one another and caring for one another. And in a world where some become discarded and vulnerable, the ultimate expression of God’s love is to care for the vulnerable, to love the least, to attend to the lowest rather than cater to the powerful. All through scripture, New Testament and early church included, is the call and the challenge to embody God’s plans and purposes through community, justice, relationships, loving one another, seeking peace. So, even while we accept Christ’s grace and forgiveness and redemption, we are still called to manifest God’s intentions in community and human relationships. And yet, our world is still wracked with violence, human trafficking, inequality, injustice, and many that are vulnerable and needy.

Our church traditions tend to gravitate towards one of these, and away from the other. Some traditions focus only the spiritual re-birth through Christ and God’s kingdom in Heaven. Others focus little on spiritual re-birth and heavily on social justice and mercy to the vulnerable. But I believe both themes exist concurrently throughout scripture, and ought to be held together, each a focus of the church. However, I think it might be easier to just focus on our personal salvation and not worry about making a just world or caring for needy. After all, what does it look like to do justice and to love mercy, as Micah instructs. What does it look like to express our piety through just actions as Isaiah admonishes. What does it look like to find Christ in the least, in caring for the naked and the prisoner?

Given the difficulty of wanting and working for justice in an unjust world and equity in a world that seeks to operate out of inequity, I find the character of Reuben intriguing. And not just because my favorite sandwich is named after him.

My own feelings toward Reuben are ambivalent, mixed. He's a figure that nowadays would probably get smeared by both political poles, each finding their faults, each unhappy with his actions or lack thereof.

On one hand, Reuben is the hero in the story. If it wasn't for Reuben's intervention, Joseph may have been killed by his own brothers. God uses Reuben to preserve Joseph's life so that Joseph may end up in Egypt for God's future plans, the ones Joseph dreams foretold. He did save Joseph's life, he did intend to rescue Joseph from the pit, he did tear his clothes at the pain and horror of realizing that his brother had been sold as property, and was as good as dead in terms of family connections. And yet, Reuben does not ultimately save Joseph. Joseph is sold, he dies socially, losing any status or family or connections in this world, carried off as someone's property.

Despite Reuben's conscience and willingness to intervene, he is rather conservative in his activism. His conscience is good, but his courage is tempered, his convictions bent by practicality and a sense of what is reasonable. These accommodations leave Joseph still sold off as a slave. In the face of an obliviousness to the violence and hatred, to the cold-heartedness that has been ingrained in his brothers, his inner compass still points true, he still knows it is wrong. But even while he is the eldest, he is timid to stand up too straight. For to stand up to a band of brothers who have spilt much blood is not an easy endeavor. To step up and raise your voice when you have seen the fury unleashed on others, it makes you hesitant. By design, I suspect.

*What does make Reuben cautious? What do you think? What makes him address the plan by proposing a lesser evil, stripping Joseph of his place in the family, stripping him of his robes and throwing him into a pit? Is it fear of the brothers' fury, that perhaps it is *he* who might be stripped of *his* place in the family next and end up in the pit *himself*, if he is not careful? Was he unsure of himself, not ready to trust his gut, not ready to trust his convictions? Was that it? Or was he just being tactful, trying to avoid conflict, trying not to offend or shame his brothers, while still acting stealthily? Or did he too want to shame Joseph, just not kill him?*

There are a number of sensible explanations. None of which would be too satisfying to Joseph, I am sure, as he walks, hands tied, away from his known world, expecting to never see his family again.

And I guess the reason I find Reuben intriguing is that despite the absolutist and black and white criticism we tend to lob at each other, and certainly at anyone on the public stage, life is muddy, and justice and good policy is hard to arrive at. And

I, like Reuben, don't always know what to do about our violent world, whether we are talking about the far corners of it, or close to home in systems of injustice, in rhetoric aimed to divide us from one another, in prison systems that target minorities and profit big investors. I don't always know how to speak to it, or what to do about it. And in a culture of over-reacting and attacking one another, of talking past each other, I am hesitant to be too confident in my position, or too sure of my sources. I tend to talk among the like-minded, and keep my voice muted in mixed company.

Violence to one's own brother, to brothers and sisters, to neighbors and fellow humans who we are supposed to love as we do ourselves. What does one do about it? What does one have to say about it? For Reuben that day, it was right in front of him, affecting his literal brother, and he has to do something. But part of the way our society works, is that we are often insulated from the violence and injustice that goes on routinely. We are able to be quietly oblivious. And, furthermore all matters of justice and equity and compassion have seemed to be politicized, making us unable to think clearly or act boldly, our political affiliations limiting what questions or actions are permitted.

But, I wonder, what conviction do you have, do I have, that you would face the fury of opposition for? That you would stand up to bloodthirsty colleagues for?

It is no surprise that Reuben is careful, measured, and cryptic in his defense of Joseph's life. The only problem is, it wasn't enough. He was not bold enough or willing to defend Joseph's humanity, his brotherhood.

“Look with pity,” reads the “Prayer for the Oppressed,” in the Book of Common Prayer (p.826). “Look with pity, O Heavenly Father, upon the people in this land who live with injustice, terror, disease, and death as their constant companions. Have mercy upon us. Help us to eliminate our cruelty to these our neighbors. Strengthen those who spend their lives establishing equal protection of the law and equal opportunities for all. And grant that every one of us may enjoy a fair portion of the riches of this land; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.”

Another story arc in the Joseph narrative is that God works in spite of human shortcomings, working all these for good and for God's purposes. Even while God does so, we are still called to a standard of lovingkindness and mercy and justice. We are still called to imitate Christ who continually dignifies those who have been treated as less, claims a place for those who have been marginalized, and proclaims a kingdom of God that does not accept the injustices of this world.

I close with the words of the Belhar confession (one of the confessions of the Presbyterian Church USA, shared with us by our Sisters and Brothers in South Africa, a confession that came out of the era of apartheid):

"Therefore, we reject any doctrine which, in such a situation, sanctions in the name of the gospel or of the will of God the forced separation of people on the grounds of race and color and thereby in advance obstructs and weakens the ministry and experience of reconciliation in Christ. (10.6)

...

[And] we believe...

- that the church must therefore stand by people in any form of suffering and need, which implies, among other things, that the church must witness against and strive against any form of injustice, so that justice may roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream;
- that the church as the possession of God must stand where the Lord stands, namely against injustice and with the wronged;
- that in following Christ the church must witness against all the powerful and privileged who selfishly seek their own interests and thus control and harm others."

Inasmuch as we are like Reuben, it is good that our hearts are burdened by injustice and harsh treatment and inequity. It is good that we act, at least a little. But may we find courage and boldness to be a voice that stands up for those who are powerless to the oppressive actions of others. May we find and perform the actions that would help us embody God's heart and compassion, God's standard of justice and mutual care, Jesus' penchant for caring the needy and marginalized. And like Reuben, may we tear our clothes in grief and repentance for the moments we have not acted as we might have.

And all God's children said...Amen.

## Genesis 37

### *Joseph Dreams of Greatness*

**37** Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup>But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

<sup>5</sup>Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. <sup>7</sup>There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." <sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

<sup>9</sup>He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

<sup>10</sup>But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" <sup>11</sup>So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

### *Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers*

<sup>12</sup>Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." <sup>14</sup>So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, <sup>15</sup>and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup>"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup>Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup>Reuben said to them, "Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him"—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. <sup>23</sup>So when

Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup> and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

<sup>25</sup> Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. <sup>26</sup> Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup> Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. <sup>28</sup> When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

<sup>29</sup> When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. <sup>30</sup> He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?”