

Drawing Circles

Genesis 45:1-11

Home Moravian Church, February 23, 2025

Today's Old Testament reading comes from the story of Joseph, which is sometimes called "The Joseph novel." It is *that* long, 14 chapters of Genesis, and *that* full of characters, themes, and plot twists. And of all this, today's assigned lectionary reading gives us eleven verses—a snippet that makes no sense unless you know all that came before them.

When you go home today, you might want to sit down and read Joseph's whole story. I highly recommend it. But today, we must be content with a summary, which I'm going to give you *before* I read today's text. So:

Jacob, patriarch of Israel, had twelve sons, as well as uncounted daughters, by four (!) wives—even then, a recipe for tortured family dynamics. Of these, he openly favored the next to youngest, Joseph, and even gave him a princely robe. It almost goes without saying, but the Bible does say, that his brothers hated him. It doesn't help that Joseph—seventeen years old when the story begins—tattles to his father about his brothers.

We learn that Joseph is "handsome and good-looking"—of course he is. He is also a bit of a mystic, telling his family of dreams that seem to place him above his brothers and even his parents.

Are we surprised that the brothers decide to get rid of him? First they think to kill him, but instead, they throw him into a pit. Then one brother, Judah, sees the chance for profit, and Joseph is hauled up and sold into slavery. While the brothers go home to lie to their father that Joseph is dead, Joseph is carried to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, an official of the pharaoh.

Potiphar likes Joseph—so much that he puts him in charge of the household. Later, though, Potiphar’s wife makes advances on him. Joseph flees her but leaves behind his garment, which she uses to falsely accuse him. He lands in prison, where—what do you know? The chief jailor likes Joseph, and puts him in charge of all the prisoners! While there, Joseph interprets the dreams of two prisoners; so, later, when Pharaoh has nightmares, Joseph is brought out of prison to interpret.

Joseph says that Pharaoh’s dreams prophesy seven years of outstanding crops followed by seven years of famine. He suggests that Pharaoh find a man who is “discerning and wise” to manage the surplus so that Egypt will have food through the famine. Pharaoh likes Joseph! And that’s how, at age thirty, Joseph winds up in charge of the agricultural economy of Egypt.

So, in the famine, Egypt has grain; and who do you think comes to buy some? Joseph’s brothers. He knows who they are, but they don’t recognize him. As they stand before him, hungry and desperate, he has the power to hurt them as he was hurt. What will he do?

Never revealing his identity, Joseph leans on his brothers, hard. For a few days, he imprisons them. He forces them to make difficult choices and puts them in compromising situations. It’s not easy for the brothers—or for Joseph. Because they don’t know he speaks their language, Joseph listens in on their conversations, and he hears them saying things like, “This is happening to us because of what we did to Joseph,” and, “Didn’t I tell you not to do it?” Joseph has to turn his head and weep.

Finally, when Joseph threatens to keep the youngest brother, Benjamin, as a slave, his brother Judah breaks down, begging Joseph not to do it, narrating Jacob’s grief over the loss of Joseph and his fear of losing Benjamin as well. Judah—the very brother who suggested selling Joseph for profit—volunteers to be a slave in Benjamin’s place, and ends with these words:

“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.”

And that’s where our reading for today begins. Let’s hear it now, Genesis 45: 1-11:

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all those who stood by him, and he cried out, “Send everyone away from me.” So no one stayed with him when Joseph made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it, and the household of Pharaoh heard it. Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” But his brothers could not answer him, so dismayed were they at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come closer to me.” And they came closer. He said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are five more years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to keep alive for you many survivors. So it was not you who sent me here but God; he has made me a father to Pharaoh and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt. Hurry and go up to my father and say to him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph, God has made me lord of all Egypt; come down to me; do not delay. You shall settle in the land of Goshen, and you shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have. I will provide for you there, since there are five more years of famine to come, so that you and your household and all that you have will not come to poverty.’

Even this is not the end of the story; but it is where the lectionary asks us to pause today, and reflect.

If you already knew the bones of this story, you probably learned it in children’s Sunday School. Judging from what I saw surfing the Internet, Joseph’s story is still mostly taught as a children’s Sunday School lesson. And I guess that’s not surprising. The infantile rage of sibling rivalry is familiar to anyone with a sibling. Even in single-child households, family members jockey for position—or, as a friend of mine once called it, “negotiate for relationship rights.”

Also, children’s Sunday school lessons often want to finish with a moral; and isn’t that provided in this text by Joseph himself? He says that it wasn’t his *brothers* who sent him to

Egypt, getting him out of their lives and making a buck at the same time, but *God*. There are a *lot* of Sunday school lessons about Joseph—I looked—whose moral is that God uses bad things for good purposes.

I think we need to be careful with that theology. What if a well-meaning preacher suggests to a patient that God gave them devastating illness in order to accomplish good? Had I done that as a hospital chaplain, I'd have been called on the carpet by my supervisor. Or what if people under wicked leaders, rather than calling out the wickedness, decide it's okay because God uses bad kings to do good? Surely God does not *create* a bad thing to produce a good result. Surely God did not need to have Joseph abused by his brothers in order to save Egypt. God could have saved Egypt by not allowing a famine in the first place.

For the record: I believe that illness happens because mortal bodies break. I believe that natural disasters happen because mortal worlds break. I believe that wickedness comes into power not by the hand of God, but through the workings of mortal societies, which also break. The history of this world offers abundant examples.

So if God doesn't cause bad things to happen, does God turn bad into good?

In his meditation on *The Problem of Pain*, C.S. Lewis considers whether and how God's idea of good might differ from ours. He writes: "If God's moral judgment differs from ours so that our 'black' may be God's 'white,' we can mean nothing by calling [God] good; for to say 'God is good' while asserting that [God's] goodness is wholly other than ours, is really only to say 'God is we know not what.' And an unknown quality in God cannot give us moral grounds for loving or obeying [God]."¹

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: MacMillan, 1948), p. 25.

Black is not white, nor does God turn the one into the other. Joseph's brothers' wicked deed remains a wicked deed. But God offers possibility of reshaping its outcome—which depends on the reshaping of hearts.

Lewis says that God's goodness "differs from ours not as white from black but as a perfect circle from a child's first attempt to draw a wheel. But when the child has learned to draw, it will know that the circle it then makes is what it was trying to make from the beginning,"²

In the same way that humans have an innate ability to draw circles, we have, each of us, an innate understanding of what is good; and everything that we learn about what is good brings our understanding closer to God's. God is always encouraging us to try drawing the circle again.

In the beginning of the Joseph story, the fractured dynamics have scrambled the circles of Joseph's family. And one day, the brothers' anger seems to overtake even their idea of circles. But read the story and you'll see that even in the midst of their wicked deeds there was ambivalence, and a plan for rescue. Maybe they never thought things would go so far. They seem to have lived in pain and grief ever after. Sunday school lessons focus on Joseph's choice to forgive his brothers; but we might consider, also, the brothers' choice to humble themselves. It's possible that the brothers have been trying to redraw their circles ever since that terrible day.

Even Joseph had to work on his circle. Would we have liked Joseph as a seventeen-year-old? I wouldn't, if I had been one of his brothers, or maybe one of his uncounted sisters. He wasn't just annoying. He was *insufferable*.

² Lewis, p. 27.

But we can also see him as someone consistently pursuing a better understanding of goodness. Maybe that's the quality that so quickly endeared him to Potiphar, then the chief jailor, then Pharaoh, all of whom recognized him as a leader. Joseph's goodness was consistent. When he tattled on his brothers as a young man, it was because his conscience was troubled by something wrong. A few years later, that same moral code enabled him to resist Potiphar's wife. That same moral code compelled him to speak truth to those whose dreams he interpreted, even when the outcome was bad, as it was for one of his fellow prisoners. By that same moral code, he recognized the coming famine as a crisis, and sought to save the people.

As Joseph grew into his gifts for leadership, his decisions were consistently undergirded by a moral code; and undergirding that code was the presence of God, which Joseph invokes throughout the story. To Potiphar's wife he says: "How could I do this great wickedness and sin against God?" To those imprisoned with him, longing for an interpretation of their dreams: "Do not interpretations belong to God?" To Pharaoh: "Not I, but God, will answer for Pharaoh's welfare" (New English Bible).

Give the child Joseph a stick and let him draw a circle in the sand. It will be a lopsided, struggling little circle. But as he grows, he'll keep trying to draw it; and by the time this story's circle brings Joseph's brothers back to stand before him, Joseph's goodness will resemble something like what God had intended all along—in fact, something like what Jesus says in today's reading from Luke: "Bless those who curse you. Pray for those who mistreat you... from anyone who takes away your coat"—that would be Joseph's brothers, just before they threw him into a pit—"do not withhold even your shirt." Isn't Jesus urging his listeners to draw circles like the one God would draw?

When Joseph had a choice of retribution or reconciliation, his circle might have gotten a little wobbly. While Joseph struggled, his brothers suffered. But he quickly learned that hurting his brothers didn't feel good. When he heard them talking about their pain, he wept. In the end, it was their pain that broke open his heart, and closed up the circle. Joseph, with all the power of the state to punish, chose to use his own power to forgive.

“Forgive,” as Jesus said, “and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap, for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” Let's notice that when Joseph was shoring up Egypt for the coming famine, Genesis says he “stored up grain in such abundance—like the sand of the sea—that he stopped measuring it; it was beyond measure.” That was the very grain he would someday share with his brothers.

Joseph clearly had special gifts: smarts and leadership skills that were noticed and rewarded. But he also had the ordinary gifts of all mortal beings: an idea of goodness, and the ability to grow. His brothers had those gifts, too. We all have those gifts, and we can all choose whether to use them.

Joseph also had the gift of faithfulness, and the gift of being able to open himself to what God was showing him. Those gifts are given to all people of faith; without them, smarts and leadership skills come to nothing, or worse.

Joseph's gifts came together with his choices to save a people, a region, and a history. And for that reason he is God's own example of what makes both a great leader, and a good brother. Pray God to hold the example before us in our own lifetime, as we sit with our sticks in the sand, trying and trying to better our own wobbly little circles. Amen.