“I Love to Tell the Story: Joseph and His Brothers”

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Genesis 37:1-4; 12-14; 17b-36

One of the classes that everyone has to take in seminary is pastoral care. In this class, we learn everything we could ever possibly need to know about offering pastoral care and we emerge from the class as experts in helping our congregants navigate the many highs and lows that come with life.

Just kidding. No one can really teach that.

One thing that we *did* do that was helpful for me in understanding family systems was to create a genogram. A genogram is a “graphic representation of a family tree that displays detailed data on relationships among individuals.”[[1]](#footnote-2) It’s basically a family tree that gives you more info than the typical who married whom and how many children they had. Structurally, it looks very similarly to a family tree, but that’s where the similarities end. Because with a genogram, you can use symbols to show patterns between generations.

On a genogram, you can indicate things like which members have or have had chronic illnesses, who has had similar occupations, even identifying patterns of alcoholism or depression. The idea behind the genogram is just that — identifying patterns, which will help us better understand who an individual is and begin to have an idea of the factors which go into making a person who they are.

We made genograms for our own families and picked different lenses to focus on. In preparing this sermon, I went back and pulled up the paper I wrote to accompany my own family’s genogram. I examined military service in my family — who served and for how long and for how many generations. I also examined loss in my family and saw how different types of losses seemed to follow certain family lines. Pretty soon, I began to see the many patterns that have helped shape me. It was a helpful exercise in understanding who I was and how I had found myself in seminary at the age of 27.

A genogram would be really helpful in understanding these first families of faith for us. If we created a genogram that began with Adam and Eve and worked our way down through the generations…through Noah and his sons…through Abraham and Isaac (and let’s not forget Ishmael!)…through to Jacob and his brother Esau, and then to today’s text with Jacob and his progeny, a genogram would really be helpful for us to get a bigger picture behind where today’s conflict comes from.

If we drew up a genogram of these early families, we would start to see some patterns emerge. We would see several instances of name changes throughout the generations. Abram to Abraham. Sarai to Sarah. Jacob to Israel.

Another pattern we would observe popping up throughout the generations is envy and the many sins it leads to. We see it from the very beginning with Cain and Abel which results in murder. We saw it a few weeks ago with Sarah and Hagar which resulted with a woman crying out in the desert because her son was going to die. In fact, this story is a great reminder of the “reality and consequences of envy and the multigenerational reality of sin.” At the end of today’s text, we are reminded once again of the envy between Sarah and Hagar when we see that Joseph is sold to some Ishmaelites — descendants of Hagar and Abraham — for twenty pieces of silver.

And there are more patterns to follow. Deception plays a role in this family tree. We see it when Abraham takes Sarah into Egypt and lies and says that Sarah is his sister. We see it just one generation before Joseph, when Jacob convinced Esau to sell him his birthright, and when he dressed as Esau in order to receive his ailing father’s blessing.

We see both envy and deception playing major roles today with Joseph and his brothers. And no party is entirely innocent.

There’s Jacob who singles his son, Joseph, out among all of his brothers and declares his favor for him by giving him a special robe. Every time the brothers had to look at Joseph in that robe, they were reminded of their father’s love for Joseph. Jacob is setting his sons up for failure.

And then there’s the brothers who allow their envy of their younger brother to take hold, to the point where they are willing to — if not kill him entirely — to sell him into slavery and then lie to their father about their treachery. As a result of this action, this entire family will end up in Egypt. They will grow and grow and be forced into bondage for Egypt until another branch of this tree will lead them out of Egypt, through the desert, and finally through to the promised land.

As generations beget future generations, so do the brothers’ sins of envy and deception beget even more sin and even more complications — which will be felt for generations to come.

This story today is just the beginning of a long line of trials and triumphs of the people of God — a story that includes us. While today’s text is a long one, it’s only the beginning of the Joseph story. As one writer notes, this long Joseph narrative — almost 15 chapters in Genesis — is about “setting up the story of those who are favored wandering in the wilderness and finding that their destination is not an easy place to be.”[[2]](#footnote-3) Who can’t appreciate that message? How many of us feel that we are wandering these days, unsure of where our destination is, when we’ll get there, and what we’ll find?

Understanding this Joseph text and its placement within the larger Biblical story of salvation is so important. When we take a step back from these familiar stories and look at the larger narrative, we start to see patterns in these family systems. And we may start to see ourselves in them, too.

Has there been a time in your life in which you underwent a change? Maybe not a name change so much, but perhaps your sense of identity? Has there been a time in your life when you were green with envy? And who among us hasn’t been guilty of deception?

In telling these stories this summer, I believe we will find ourselves in them over and over again. We will see how these stories that are so, so old and ancient are still relevant to us today. They will make us question ourselves, our allegiances, our faith in God. We may find ourselves in the roles of the hero or the villain or both.

There is one more pattern in this ancient family genogram that I would like to point out — and that is the dreamers.

There are so many dreamers in these Biblical stories. There’s Jacob who has the dream of the ladder reaching to the heavens. And then there’s Laban, Jacob’s father-in-law, who is told by God in a dream to let Jacob be.

And then there’s Joseph. Another part of this larger Joseph narrative involves a series of dreams which he interprets in front of his brothers. In these dreams, representations of the brothers bow down to Joseph in reverence and obeisance.

Later on in his story, dreams will continue to play an important role. Joseph will interpret the dreams of two royal ministers which will be the impetus for Joseph’s freedom from prison. And finally, he will interpret dreams for Pharaoh, becoming the one simultaneously to deliver the bad news that a great famine is coming and to be the one who will see Egypt through the famine.

Joseph’s relationship with dreams both dooms him and saves him. When the brothers spy Joseph approaching them in the fields in today’s text, they say to one another, “Here comes this dreamer.” They are so overcome with envy that they contrive to kill their brother.

This dreamer is too much for them. He poses a threat and that threat must be eliminated. And so they act.

At the Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial Service at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta every year, worship begins with sentences from today’s text: “Behold, this dreamer cometh. Come now therefore, and let us slay him … and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” As Presbyterian pastor Patrick Willson notes, “The effect is chilling.”[[3]](#footnote-4)

It is chilling because in that one sentence, we are reminded of how the brokenness of our world today continues to silence dreamers. We can see the patterns of envy and deception continue from Joseph’s story, through Moses and the Israelites, through to Jesus and Judas and Peter, through to God’s people today. We see how the story has continued. And it forces us to ask what our roles have been in it.

Because we *are* a part of it. We dream dreams, we have our convictions of how God would order the world. We also add our own instances of treachery and deceit. We let envy take hold of us every now and then. The genogram that we create for Abraham’s lineage continues to include us today. We are all branches on this family tree of faith.

And what will you add to the genogram of this family of faith? How will you be a part of the patterns already established? Or how will you help to break a pattern?

The one person missing from today’s text, but who is there the whole time is God. God is the one who was with Joseph in those dreams — even though Joseph was too immature to recognize it. God is with Reuben and Judah when they have second thoughts about killing their brother — even though their motivations for sparing him weren’t pure. God is with Jacob when he is wrought with grief over the loss of his favorite son — even though perhaps he shouldn’t have played favorites to begin with. God will continue to be with this family of faith, as they move forward, stumbling and falling over themselves at times.

God has kept the covenant with God’s people throughout the generations — generations that continue to include us today. God continues to be faithful to us today, even as we mess up, as we get caught up in the wrong things, as we fail to recognize and honor the Christ in each person that we meet.

God is with us. God is with the ten people socially gathered in this sanctuary today. God is with you, from wherever you join us virtually. And God will continue to be with us, guiding us as we continue to contribute to the story begun so long ago.

And God loves to tell our story.

All praise be to God.

Amen.

1. https://www.genopro.com/genogram/#:~:text=A%20genogram%20(pronounced%3A%20jen%2D,psychological%20factors%20that%20punctuate%20relationships. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Geoffery M. St. J. Hoare; Feasting on the Word Proper 14; Page 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Patrick Willson; Feasting on the Word; Proper 14; Page 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)