



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

What You Intended For Harm

SCRIPTURE:
Genesis 37:18-28

September 4, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Zach Walker

I am not sure what you may or may not know about Joseph. In the Bible, Joseph is kind of a big deal. Maybe all you know about him is his technicolor dream coat and that's a good start. He's kind of a 'rags to riches' story—the twelfth son, Daddy's favorite, with an unexpected rise to being advisor to Pharaoh.

We read a snippet of Joseph's story this morning. It's a story that happens in fits and spurts over the course of about 15 chapters of Genesis, so you'll understand why we didn't read through all of it, although I recommend adding it to your list.

What you'll discover if you do, or what you might know already, is that Joseph had a rough road for a long time. He might have been his father's favorite, but his 11 brothers had other feelings about that. The verses we read today tell the beginning of what is fair to assume is significant trauma for Joseph.

Let's just name it right now: 'Trauma' is a loaded word. The word itself comes from Greek, meaning 'wound,' and originally referred to only physical wounds, but now applies to psychological wounds as well. It can be a clinical term: The response to a deeply distressing or disturbing event that overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. It's also a word we throw around a lot. There are differing kinds of trauma—and today, I don't pretend to use the word clinically and it isn't my intention to do so, for a few reasons.

First, I think what is experienced as trauma is different for different people. What is traumatic for one person may not necessarily be traumatic for another, for reasons we understand and for reasons we don't.

Second, I don't think it is entirely healthy to get into comparisons when we are reflecting on what has been wounding, or traumatic, for us. I know too many people who minimize or don't recognize their

own feelings or processes because they point to someone else who has it worse. I think perspective is important, but when it interferes with our healthy processing of significant events in our lives, that kind of perspective-izing isn't good.

That's worth keeping in mind as we look at Joseph's story today. You see, Joseph, among many other things, had a gift. He had this talent for interpreting dreams and without getting too deep into that, let's just say he had some dreams relatively early in his life that gave his older brothers reason to be offended. As the twelfth son, he didn't rank well in the sibling hierarchy but in his dreams, all his brothers were bowing down before him. And he doesn't keep this to himself. This was offensive to the brothers—so much so that they debate killing him, which is where we jumped into our reading today.

Somewhat cooler heads prevail, if that can be said, and they settle on selling Joseph into slavery for 20 pieces of silver—not an insignificant amount of money at the time, but I do wonder, incidentally, how 11 not-quite-murderous brothers decided to split 20 pieces. Another sermon for another time.

Whatever faults Joseph had, and however much his brothers disliked him, being sold into slavery by his brothers was wrong. And it was traumatic. Family has potential to be the source of trauma in our lives.

Many of us can point to wounds from members of our family. Sometimes that trauma or pain feels shameful because we think something must have been wrong with our family, or with us, to have so much broken. I very much know that feeling. As some of you know, some of my own trauma centers around the family in which I grew up. I'm the middle child of three brothers. My oldest brother, Lee, from the age of 4 until the age of about 13 was abused by family outside our home—family, as you can imagine, I am

no longer in touch with. It was not until Lee attempted suicide for the first time that our family learned about what had happened.

That began a long road of treatment and therapy in various ways for all of us. My younger brother would make some reckless choices for a long time, but ultimately came out the other side. My parents divorced. And my older brother fought for 10 years before completing suicide in 2003. It is important to share from this pulpit that my family is kind of messed up. If you have ever had that thought about your family, you are not alone!

I don't know how much processing Joseph did about what happened. I have to wonder if Joseph, in that caravan of slaves ever thought, "That was a messed-up way to be treated by my family!" If Joseph was any kind of normal human being, I also imagine he spent a great deal of time being hurt and dealing with both the physical and psychological consequences of what was done to him.

However he processed it, eventually he winds up as a servant in Potiphar's house, the captain of the Egyptian guard. Things go well for a while. Joseph is good at his job. And then Potiphar's wife starts to make it clear she has interest in Joseph. Day after day she harasses him; makes advances toward him. And Joseph, again and again, does the right thing and rejects her. And what is his reward for doing the right thing? Potiphar's wife makes up a story: Joseph was after her the whole time, she tells her husband, the chief of the Egyptian guard! And how insulting that such a person would be in their household. Joseph is promptly thrown into jail.

Friends, I don't know what you do for work, but can we all admit that workplaces can be another source of harassment and trauma? And we know full well that women and LGBTQIA+ persons face such daily realities. It is not uncommon that in certain workplaces we can be rewarded for doing the wrong thing and punished for doing the right thing. That, on its own, is wrong and hurtful—not to mention wrongful termination, scapegoating, unrealistic expectations, diminishment and bullying, and a whole host of other things our workaholic culture creates—resulting in burnout, harmful coping mechanisms and secondary harm to our family and other relationships.

So Joseph winds up in jail after being harassed and after doing the right thing. While he is there, he develops a reputation as a 'good prisoner,' someone the guards could trust, and after a time, two other prisoners arrive: Pharaoh's baker and the cupbearer. If you are unfamiliar with the profession of cupbearing, it is what you might guess: a person who serves the cup (often of wine or whatever else) to Pharaoh. Pharaoh had to be careful that people didn't murder him, which might be done by poisoning his drink. So the cupbearer guarded that cup and would often drink from it first to test it. The cupbearer was a very trusted part of Pharaoh's inner circle. And for the cupbearer to land in prison clearly meant trust had been broken.

So these two land in jail and the guards tell Joseph to take care of them. And it isn't too long before the baker and the cupbearer start to have dreams. Joseph, hearing this, decides to use his gift again—the gift that landed him in the bottom of a pit and on this difficult path. Joseph interprets that the cupbearer would soon be freed and once again serve the cup to Pharaoh. Joseph asks, "Please remember me when you are out of this place and all is well with you. Please tell Pharaoh that I am innocent and have done nothing wrong!" Three days later the cupbearer is, in fact, freed! And what do you think he does? Nothing. He forgets Joseph, and for two more years, Joseph sits in prison.

Because in addition to family and work, many of us have been broken by friendships or other important relationships in our lives. Betrayal, violence, not showing up when we most need them, broken promises—many of us know too well the ways we have been hurt by those we trust. So what are we to do when family, work, or friends—or just the circumstances of life—result in trauma?

A few reflections on that. First, I do not believe God is the author of your trauma. I say it again: God is not the author of your trauma. At no point do we see any hint or suggestion in Joseph's story that these deeds were God's design. At every turn, we see humans making human decisions that cause disastrous consequences for other humans. They are human decisions fueled by jealousy, anger, or thoughtlessness. It's in the aftermath of trauma where God is at work.

If someone has ever told you, or if you have somehow come to believe that some trauma in your life is God's doing, or is a test from God—God bless whoever made you believe that, but they are wrong. I'll put it plainly: Your trauma is not a test from God. God did not give you your trauma.

The endpoint of Joseph's story arc is when he faces the very brothers who betrayed him and what he ultimately says to them is, "What you intended for harm, God intended for good." In other words, "That terrible thing you did, God worked in the midst of that terrible thing and did everything God could to remind me I still have worth." So God was not the cause of the trauma, yet God sat with Joseph in and beyond the trauma. Sat at Joseph's side as the consequences of the trauma played out. Which is to say, God does not forsake us.

And that brings me to another observation. If the first is that God is not the author of your trauma, the second is this: Joseph had work to do, and so do we. We cannot wait for and expect God to do all the work, and then wonder why nothing changes. I'm not saying God won't do the work, I'm not saying God doesn't do the work, I'm not saying God can't do the work. But I think assuming we have no role in that work is misguided. God made us strong. We are resilient. We are capable.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu wrote, "We are not responsible for what breaks us, but can be responsible for what puts us back together again."

So our task, if you will, in the face of trauma is to feel the feelings, learn the lessons, and then learn how to let the heaviness go.¹ Don't mishear me. Your feelings are valid, your pain is valid. Your timeline is your timeline, and no one else's, and you are allowed to deal with trauma at the pace that is healthy for you. But you do not have to be stuck forever with the heaviness.

Feel your feelings. Learn the lessons. Let go of the heaviness. To feel the feelings is to give yourself

permission to validate how something makes you feel, how it has affected and is affecting you. It helps to give a name to what you feel.

When my brother took his life, I felt a lot of things, some of which wouldn't reveal themselves for years. Of course, and obviously, I felt anger toward the family that had been that cause of this. But I was surprised to find myself also angry at Lee. I didn't blame him, but I was angry at him for choosing what he chose. In time, I came to see that all my feelings were and are valid.

Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, in her book "Fierce Love," points out that the heavy burdens we carry have lessons for us. "The unforgiven hurts," she writes, "the bitter resentments and the hard feelings that weigh us down have stories to tell us, and wisdom to offer." How do my feelings make up part of who I am and where do they come from? When I am prepared, how can or might I confront the source of what happened?² What does it mean as I continue to live my life bravely and in light of the redeeming love of Jesus Christ? Sometimes relationships can be healed. Sometimes healing looks like boundaries that say, "You can no longer be in my life."

As we learn whatever lessons are there to be learned, we can let go of the heaviness. That doesn't mean we let go of it altogether or forget it happened. It doesn't mean we sweep it under the rug. What it does mean is that all of us do (or will) have hurt places in our soul and in the face of hard moments, the project is learning how to heal and get lighter.

We do that by talking about it. We do that with love and support. We do that with people we trust. We do that with a good therapist. And we do that knowing God is not the author of what happened. We do that knowing God is fiercely at work in us and with us in the aftermath.

Joseph told those who inflicted trauma, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." May it be so.

1 Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, *Fierce Love* (2021), p. 111.

2 Rev. Dr. Lewis is careful to note later that not all confrontation with moral courage will automatically transform our lives. "Sometimes confrontation goes wildly wrong!" (p. 163). But she notes that when things need changing, that doesn't happen without us turning toward them and trying to change them. Let's note, this is courageous work.