

Lent Devotional March 10, 2020

Scripture

Genesis 42:1-17

1 When Jacob learned that there was grain in Egypt, he said to his sons, "Why do you keep looking at one another? 2 I have heard," he said, "that there is grain in Egypt; go down and buy grain for us there, that we may live and not die." 3 So ten of Joseph's brothers went down to buy grain in Egypt. 4 But Jacob did not send Joseph's brother Benjamin with his brothers, for he feared that harm might come to him. 5 Thus the sons of Israel were among the other people who came to buy grain, for the famine had reached the land of Canaan. 6 Now Joseph was governor over the land; it was he who sold to all the people of the land. And Joseph's brothers came and bowed themselves before him with their faces to the ground. 7 When Joseph saw his brothers, he recognized them, but he treated them like strangers and spoke harshly to them. "Where do you come from?" he said. They said, "From the land of Canaan, to buy food." 8 Although Joseph had recognized his brothers, they did not recognize him. 9 Joseph also remembered the dreams that he had dreamed about them. He said to them, "You are spies; you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" 10 They said to him, "No, my lord; your servants have come to buy food. 11 We are all sons of one man; we are honest men; your servants have never been spies." 12 But he said to them, "No, you have come to see the nakedness of the land!" 13 They said, "We, your servants, are twelve brothers, the sons of a certain man in the land of Canaan; the youngest, however, is now with our father, and one is no more." 14 But Joseph said to them, "It is just as I have said to you; you are spies! 15 Here is how you shall be tested: as Pharaoh lives, you shall not leave this place unless your youngest brother comes here! 16 Let one of you go and bring your brother, while the rest of you remain in prison, in order that your words may be tested, whether there is truth in you; or else, as Pharaoh lives, surely you are spies." 17 And he put them all together in prison for three days.

Devotional

Dr. Daniel O. Aleshire, Board Member

Brothers didn't do very well in Genesis. Cain killed Abel; Jacob swindled his twin brother out of his rightful inheritance; Jacob's older sons sold their younger brother, Joseph, to traveling slave traders. In today's text from Genesis, Jacob "did not send" the youngest son with the older brothers because he "feared that harm might come to him." It appears Jacob remembered what had happened to Joseph. Perhaps it was envy or jealousy, or ancient testosterone, or perhaps something else, but this book of many wonderful beginnings also records the beginning of tragic fraternal conflict.

In today's text, it is not clear why Joseph treats his brothers the way that he does. One reading would put anger at the center of his behavior: he treats them harshly; accuses them of being spies even though he knows they are not; requires one of them to return to Canaan to get the youngest brother, and puts the rest in jail for a few days. Another reading is that Joseph is the loyal governor of the pharaoh—and at a time when many were coming to Egypt in search of food because of widespread famine, it is Joseph's job to care for the careful distribution of Egypt's food reserves—even if the petitioners are his brothers and he is pompous and overbearing about how he does the job. While the story continues with tender moments, with food for Abraham and his family, and even with reconciliation among the brothers, this text is full of reminders of tragically broken brotherly bonds.

Jesus' words in the Sermon on the Mount come to mind: "if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment." Maybe Lent is a good time to assess the anger, envy, and jealousy we hold toward others. Maybe this Lenten season would be a good time finally to give them up. And, maybe, giving them up for a season would lessen their grip on us the rest of the year.

Prayer

God of grace and mercy, give us insight into the tendencies in us that strain family relationships. Give us courage to seek their resolution. Help us tend to relationships beyond our families—with neighbors and enemies, with immigrants and those seeking justice, with strangers near and far. Teach us to be our brother's keeper. Amen.