

“TWIST OF FATE”
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Genesis 45:1-15

This morning’s lesson from the Book of Genesis could be one of the greatest “gotcha” scenes in all of scriptures. I mean, it has all the elements of a great Hollywood movie, and this part of the Joseph story, today’s lesson, is the great climax! You just know what’s coming - somebody’s gonna get it!

Well, to get to the climax, I need a spend a few minutes reminding you of what’s come before - or none of it will make sense. Joseph, as you know, was the youngest son of Jacob. Joseph was born was Jacob was well advanced in years, and Jacob absolutely, positively doted on him. As a matter of fact, it sounds a little nauseating when you read the scriptures. He fawned over him, protected him, kept him at home while his other sons were out working - hard, and he gave him that famous coat of many colors. In other words, Jacob practically threw in the face of his other sons his favoritism for Joseph.

Well, you can imagine how that went over with the boys! Who among us would want to see that from a parent - to know that that certain child was loved more, and coddled, and adored more than you. Well, that ate away at those brothers over the years.

It didn’t help that Joseph was a bit of a brat too! The scripture tells us that one day his father sent him with his brothers, and he came back and reported that they weren’t working very hard. Lovely brother, huh?

On top of that, Joseph was a dreamer. One of the dreams he had, and that, of course, he shared with his family was, that one day he would rule over them.

Well, that took the cake. So, one day, another day when Jacob sent Joseph out in the fields to check on them, the brothers had had it. They determined to get rid of the little pest. So they threw him in a pit, and then discussed what to do with him. While they were discussing it, some travelers went by. “Aha!” thought the brothers. “We’ll sell him to these travelers and we’ll be done with him.” Which is exactly what they did. They sold him to travelers going to Egypt.

Off he went. After they were gone, the brothers took that precious coat of many colors, dipped it into animal blood, went home and told their father Jacob that

his beloved Joseph had been attacked and killed by wild animals, and that was that, they were done with him. And poor Jacob's heart was broken.

Meanwhile, the story continues. Hang in there with me! The men who bought Joseph make it to Egypt, and they sell him to a man named Potiphar, one of Pharaoh's underlings. Potiphar puts him to work in his household, and soon enough, Potiphar's wife takes a shine to him. Really takes a shine to him, and does everything she can to seduce him. But Joseph won't do it, and after his second refusal, in her anger at being scorned, Potiphar's wife sets him up, tells her husband that Joseph has taken advantage of her, and Potiphar believes her and throws poor Joseph in jail.

You still with me? Well, while in jail, Joseph does pretty well for himself, amazingly. He continues to have his dreams, and one of them is pretty significant. He dreams about a coming famine - and word gets to Pharaoh, who wisely listens to Joseph. He believes his prophecy, and prepares the whole land for the coming famine. During the good years, he grows well and stocks up well.

Then when the famine came, the Egyptians were prepared, but no one else was. People were starving all over the place, including, yes, Jacob and his sons. We're coming to the end, folks!

So old Jacob hears that Pharaoh's gang has food in abundance, and hears that there is this man they can go to to get some of that food. So he sends his sons to Egypt to get some food, and they come into this room, and stand before this man. They've never seen him before (or so they think), but as soon as they come into the room Joseph recognizes each and every one of them - they are his brothers.

You see what I meant now at the beginning of the sermon? It's the ultimate "gotcha" scene. Joseph has them right where he wants them. They are literally starving for what he has to offer, and he holds their future, literally, in his hands. He can finally get back at them for all the mean things they did to him, for all the suffering they caused him, for the hate they spewed at him. They're about to get what they deserve after they broke their father's heart, and nearly killed the favored son. It's Joseph's moment to exact revenge . . . He's got them right where he wants them. Now, he can get them -

But, he doesn't. He doesn't! In an absolutely amazing twist of fate, Joseph does the exact opposite of what we'd expect him to do. Instead of "getting them", he gave to them - grace, forgiveness, love, a new start. Straight out - no questions asked, no explanation demanded, no retribution imparted, no groveling required. He just simply poured grace upon them.

It is astounding, isn't it? We're surprised by it, because we're used to the way things usually go today in our "eye for an eye", "give me a reason to sue you" culture. We demand retribution, we want people to pay, if we're wronged people sure better make it right.

What on earth would make Joseph forgive his brothers like that? Just simply forgive them, and go on? Well, let's take a closer look at that.

I want to suggest to you this morning that Joseph was able to do what he did because he rose up over the whole situation and looked at it from a wider perspective than just he and his brothers and what they did to him. Look at what the scripture said. Joseph didn't dwell on the evils the brothers had done, but talked instead about what God had done with it. He talked about how God had carried him through it, and had given him gifts to use in it. He talked about how God had cared for an entire people through him being in the right place in the right time, even though what got him there originally was evil.

Instead of dwelling on the tragedy of what his brothers had done to him, Joseph dwelled on the blessings God had wrought through him through the whole ordeal. So instead of being mired in bitterness and anger and "would haves" and "could haves", Joseph celebrated God's hand in bringing purpose out of the chaos the brothers had caused.

In a wonderful sermon on this text, Barbara Brown Taylor put it this way: "When Joseph wanted to hear the voice of God, he listened to his life - to his dreams, to the people he met along the way, to the things that happened to him each day. These were how God spoke to him and he learned to be a good interpreter of them, paying close attention to all the events of his life, even the ones that hurt and frightened him, the ones that seemed to go against the will of God. They may not have made sense to him one by one, but by the time his brothers showed up he could see the pattern. No one explained it to him, but he could see God's fingerprints all over the place." (*Gospel Medicine*, "Listening to Your Life," p. 116.)

And because he could, instead of "getting" his brothers, he forgave them, set them free, and moved on.

We would do well, I think, to, every once in a while, do as Joseph did, and think about our lives, listen to our lives. For if we did, I think we would see, as Barbara Brown Taylor put it, "God's fingerprints all over the place." The great Biblical commentator Barclay once said that when we take time to do that, "we look back over our lives and we know that God is in control. We do not often experience those shattering confrontations with the divine that people in the Bible seem always to be experiencing. Our experience is much more like Joseph's and his brothers', a realization every now and again that events we once thought had no

purpose in them, events perhaps that were calamitous in their immediate consequences, events even in which we ourselves acted meanly and shamefully, were in fact blessings in disguise, part and parcel of a larger and ongoing divine plan for us and ours.” (Barclay, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 292).

You know, some years back, I had a moment of clarity not unlike Joseph’s. I don’t know what caused me to do it, but one day I was thinking back on the years in my life right after I graduated from college. I got a Bachelors’ degree from Salisbury State in History in December of 1976. I graduated a semester early, so I came home at the end of December with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History. Do you know what kind of job you can get with a Bachelor of Arts degree in history?

(I have to tell you that I was originally majoring in History Education, but I dropped out of the Education track, because I was afraid to speak in front of people! Ironic, isn’t it? But that’s part of the story!)

So I get back to Elkton, and have to find a job, and over the next seven years or so, I had a number of jobs - none of them in history, by the way! I worked for a while at a tank and manufacturing company in New Castle as a secretary. I worked in the courthouse here in Elkton as a title searcher for a while. Then I worked at the University of Delaware for five years, first in Housing and Residence Life, then in the Dean of Students’ Office.

I made great friends in all of those jobs, but I was unhappy a lot of the time. I knew I wasn’t doing what I was meant to be doing. I was frustrated a lot.

Meanwhile, I was working almost full-time as a volunteer at my church - Asbury Church in New Castle. I was directing the handbell choir, serving as the youth leader, working with education, serving on all sorts of committees.

In the fall of 1984, I entered Wesley Theological Seminary and the rest, as they say, is history. But there was one day, when I listened to my life as Joseph did, and this is what I saw. In all those ways, in all those days, in all those jobs, God was with me, and God gave me something through each and every one of them that has served me well in my ministry to Him.

I learned administration in my work at that tank company, I learned about research and details and stories through my title searching, I learned about working with young people and dealing with the public at the University of Delaware. I even learned not to be afraid to speak in front of people in my work at the church. All along the way, God prepared me for where I am today. God took what was, for me, at times, chaos and brought good out of it.

Thank goodness Joseph listened to his life, that he looked back over what had

transpired in all those years, and rather than being burdened with bitterness, having seen what God had done, he went out and did the very same thing. He took something bad and made it good. He let go of the past and looked to the future.

I'll never forget reading something once about General Robert E. Lee visiting a woman in Kentucky after the war. She took him out into her front yard to the remains of a grand old tree. There she bitterly cried that its limbs and trunk had been destroyed by Federal artillery fire. She looked to Lee, and expected him to condemn the North or at least sympathize with her loss. Instead, after a brief silence, he said, "Cut it down, my dear Madam, and forget it."

Cut it down and forget it - which is exactly what Joseph did. He cut down the justifiable anger, bitterness and desire for revenge, and instead poured out grace upon his brothers. What an incredible twist of fate!

I don't know what's going on in your life right now, but if you're struggling in any way, I want to invite you to listen to your life and see where God is in it - for He is, most assuredly right in the middle of it, and can make a way where you can't see it. He can take all things and give them purpose, even the bad things.

As a matter of fact, even if you're not struggling today, you listen to your life too. For I can assure you that in the blessings, God is there too, there is a purpose for them too, and God will use them in your life for good.

Finally, let me invite all of us to learn what I think is the most compelling lesson of all from Joseph's story - and that is that when we're faced with a "gotcha" moment, a moment in which we can choose revenge, getting even, retribution, or we can choose grace, let us choose grace - always. Choose grace - for that is the way of our God, that is what God gave to each of us so perfectly in Jesus Christ, and that is the life God wants us to share with each other in this hurting world.

Choose grace! May it be so!

Amen.