

“Could Be Worse”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
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Old Testament lesson: Genesis 37:1-4, 19-28

New Testament lesson: Romans 11:33-36

Olympic athlete Bruce Jenner once told about a friend who ran the decathlon. “He was a Christian, very religious, and he messed up one of the events. After it was over he came to (Jenner) and said, ‘It was God’s will.’ (Jenner’s) first reaction to that was, ‘God wasn’t the one who stepped out of the discus circle.’ “I wouldn’t have looked at it that way,” said Jenner. “I would have blame it on me. If I foul three times, that’s not God’s fault. I’m the one throwing the discus.” His point is you have to take responsibility for your beliefs about how God works *and* take responsibility for your part in how life plays out.

The story of the family of Jacob – also known as Israel – shows us what it’s like to be with a God who has a plan. And folks, let me tell you, it’s not all sunshine and roses, necessarily.

Let’s start by looking at Jacob and his son Joseph. As we saw last week, Jacob deceived his father in stealing his brother, Esau’s, birthright – or blessing – as the oldest son. And this caused the family much distress. But eventually, Jacob and Esau reconcile, in keeping with God’s plan.

So God may not have planned how things happened – exactly – but God sure did plan how things turned out – ultimately. Jacob goes on to live a long and fruitful life, having 12 sons, Joseph among them. Jacob – or Israel, as he’s called at this point – loves his son Joseph more than all his other children. Some people criticize him for this, and maybe rightly so – playing favorites.

The point isn’t what we do – as fallible as we are – but rather what God does – even given our human frailty, our vulnerability to temptation, our weakness in following society’s most sinful, misguided ways.

That’s the story of Jacob. The story of Joseph, on the other hand, shows us how to actually stay aligned with God’s will, no matter what.

As we heard, Joseph is daddy’s favorite, which isn’t his fault. He can’t help that. But Joseph can and must learn to take responsibility for his position in the family, and the role God would have for him in the world.

The first thing we learn about Joseph is that his job is “helper to his brothers,” in shepherding the family’s flock of sheep. Joseph comes to his father and brings (quote) “a bad report of them.”

Joseph is a tattle tail – a 17-year-old tattle tail strutting around in his coat of many colors, in his flowing robe with great, broad sleeves, which by the way, was given to him by his father, as a sign of his great love for Joseph, most of all, Joseph. You don’t have to be a family psychologist to see where this is going. The Bible tells us that Joseph’s brothers hated him and could not speak peaceably to him, and maybe understandably. Who likes a tattle-tail, daddy’s boy. This is shaping up just like things did with Jacob and Esau, a terrible family rift. And yet, this is the chosen family, God’s hope for all the world.

Being in a dysfunctional family does not mean that God cannot use you for good, and your family. He can, and will, and does, all the time. We are all dysfunctional to one degree or another – all families are, all societies are. That’s why we need to follow God, not society and certainly not a messed up, not the family cycle generation after generation.

We have to take responsibility for our thoughts and actions, clean them up when we can, *and* keep the faith when things seem so out of control it could never get better – only get worse.

Joseph is in a bad situation getting worse. His brothers see him coming a mile away and say to one another, “Here comes ‘this dreamer.’ Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.”

They call Joseph “this dreamer.” Like father like son – remember Jacob’s dreams about the ladder and about wrestling with God. Jacob dreamed he would received the promised land and be a blessing to all the people of the earth, he and his offspring.

So far, so bad. It’s not really shaping up that way, is it – a father playing favorites, the youngest son lording it over his older brothers, a pack of lies and plans of murder and deceit – plans to trick Jacob into thinking Joseph is killed by wild animals not unlike Jacob tricked his father Isaac and stealing his brother, Esau’s birthright.

What a family! What’s a God to do? And what about our families, our society? What is God doing, today, with us? We live in a time when being faithful to God means being completely countercultural – coming to church on Sunday; giving a 10th of your money to the Lord; inconveniencing ourselves for the sake of others, through hospital visits, rides to the doctor, meals for the homeless, school supplies for other people’s children, serving on church committees – uh! I mean who does this!?!

We do, as Christians, when we are at our best. And when we’re not at our best, we still remain faithful – as Christians – and hopeful, and humble – before God and one nother,

offering each other grace, in accordance with God's mercy. Sometimes this means acting profoundly countercultural, risking some discomfort physically, emotionally, financially as we align ourselves with God's will, overcoming our human nature, our human shortfalls. It means:

- Looking beyond familiar family members and next-door neighbors and making friends with people who are different from us.
- Learning to understand and work with the new and unfamiliar aspects of our diverse and rapidly changing society – like people who are gay or transgender. They're still people, aren't they. – Regardless of our beliefs about it, they're still children of God?
 - It means, facing unexpected difficulties with faith and hope instead of resentment and bitterness.
- Holding tightly to a sense of ethics and morality instead of following the crowd in misguided decisions and actions.
 - Working hard and preparing for the future, rather than giving up – as if it doesn't matter what you do or how well you do it.
- It means responding to evil with good – counting on good to overcome evil, even when we've been knocked to the floor, or like Joseph, thrown into a pit and left to die.

The Spirit of God never abandoned Joseph and it won't abandoned us. The Bible tells us that not all of Joseph's brothers want to kill him. One brother, named Reuben, wants to save his life. That's God, never abandoning us.

We are told in the Bible that another brother named, Judah, has a different response. He says, "What *profit* is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites. ... And his brothers agreed." That's God using even evil, greedy intentions to work out God's divine and glorious purpose. So the brothers sell Joseph to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver, and they take him to Egypt, where a great famine is about to spread throughout the land.

Next week, we will look at how God continues to work even through this dysfunctional family, and also through the all-consuming power and greed of their society.

But for now, let us be reminded that no matter how uncertain things are, no matter how crazy this world gets, no matter how misguided we are as human beings, and family members, and individuals – no matter how worse things seem to get – God has this. God is here to guide it all, overcome it all.

Yes, it could be worse – might get worse. But as we'll see next week, it will get better – always – thanks to God's almighty power, God's gracious and merciful heart, and God's unsearchable, divine wisdom. Whatever you're going through this week or at this stage in your life, God has you, and will never leave your side, never abandon you. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer

Almighty God, sometimes the difficulties and burdens of our lives cause us to doubt your goodness.

We are an anxious people, often grasping to trust in your promise to work all things for good.

Increase our faith and grant us your peace, that our lives will demonstrate our trust in you.

We ask your grace and mercy on all those in need – especially for those facing disease and illness, fears about job security and finances, the safety of loved ones and the health of our nation.

We pray this as your beloved children, confident in your power and wisdom. In the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts, as we forgive
our debtors;
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,
For thine is the Kingdom, and the Power, and the Glory, forever. Amen.**