

“O, Brothers!”

Relationships, part 4

Genesis 37:1-11

[1-title] *Welcome.*

Would you please pray with me? O Lord, our God, how majestic is your name in all the earth. We humbly come before you in your house, asking that you speak to us through your scripture. Send your Holy Spirit down on us. Teach us how to be the church and spread the gospel to all. Let nothing stand in the way between us and the way of forgiveness. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

[2-Three boys and Annie] How many of you here had the good fortune of growing up with brothers or sisters? I have two brothers: Matt and Todd, and I’m stuck in the middle. Like many of you, I had some fights with my brothers growing up. What is it about families that makes us get on each other’s nerves so much? It probably has to do with proximity. We grew up in the same house, sharing the same bathroom, cleaning up after the same dogs, attending the same school, tackling each other on the same front lawn. Unlike friends we may see every once in a while, we live with our families 24/7, which makes it really hard to get away from them.

[3-Todd, Matt and Eric] Did anyone here have any sibling rivalries? What do you think caused them? Some might claim that our parents played favorites. Raise your hand if one of your brothers or sisters was “perfect” in Mom’s or Dad’s eyes. Everybody knows somebody who was Daddy’s little girl or Momma’s boy. They could never do anything wrong, as far as your parent was concerned. I won’t tell you which one of the three of us wore that label – I’m pretty sure it varied throughout our lives, although I may have scored points for having the first grandchild. The point is, if you have ever seen disfunction in your family or any family, you may very well resonate with our story this morning.

[4-God wants us to reconcile] The truth we need to hear today is this: God wants us to reconcile. Whether it’s your crazy family or your crazy personal relationships, and I have my fair share of them, this is the truth we need to know. That is why I love the story of Joseph so much. It’s real, not some made-for-TV

drama. If you have never read it, look through Genesis 37-45, and see how your family and friendships compare.

[5-scripture] Starting in Genesis 37, we read: “Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers...and he brought their father a bad report about them.

“Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.” (Genesis 37:2-4)

[6-Joseph’s dreams] So the first thing the Bible tells us is that Joseph was a tattletale and Daddy’s favorite. That’s not a great way to impress your older brothers, unless you have a death wish.

Joseph was the oldest son of his father’s second wife. Jacob, also known as Israel, even had a special robe made for Joseph to identify him as his favorite son. So Joseph, the tattletale, ran around in his favorite shirt from Dad, rattling on his brothers. As if this was not enough to aggravate his older brothers, Joseph had the arrogance to tell them about his dreams. (Genesis 37:5-11) In one dream his brothers were harvesting grain, and as they gathered the wheat into sheaves, his brothers’ sheaves bowed down to the one Joseph that made. In another dream, Joseph saw the sun and the moon and eleven stars bow down to him. And of course, he had to shoot his mouth off about these dreams in front of his whole family.

[7-Joseph thrown in the well] Jacob saw all of this happening and really didn’t do anything to prevent these rivalries. As a father, Jacob never addressed the turmoil. Finally the brothers had had enough. They let their anger get the best of them. They saw Joseph coming in the distance, and plotted his murder. They grabbed Joseph, took off his coat, and threw him in an empty well. (Genesis 37:12-24)

[8-Joseph sold] After some debate, they all decided it would be easier and more profitable to get rid of Joseph by selling him to slave traders. They faked Joseph’s death; tore his coat and soaked it in animal blood, brought it back to his father, allowing him to believe that Joseph had died.

I don't care how much you think your brothers or sisters hated you when you got the best Christmas present; that's pretty low.

Ask yourself, how did Joseph feel? This was not some practical joke. His brothers' hatred was real, whether or not it was deserved. They didn't care what happened to him. In their minds, Joseph was already dead. This brings to mind how Jesus taught that you don't have to physically murder somebody in order to kill them in your mind. (Matthew 5:21-23)

[9-Joseph and Potiphar] Here's the short version of what happened next: Joseph was sold to a man named Potiphar, who worked for the Pharaoh in Egypt. Even though Joseph served Potiphar faithfully, Joseph was falsely accused by his master's wife. Joseph was thrown prison, where he again worked as hard as he could.

[10-Joseph in prison] While Joseph was in prison, he met two men: the pharaoh's baker and the pharaoh's wine taster. Joseph interpreted their dreams: the baker was to be hanged, and the wine taster was to be restored to his former job. Joseph hoped that the wine taster would put in a good word for him, but instead the wine taster just forgot about him.

The Bible doesn't say how long he was in slavery and in prison. The beginning of chapter 40 only says it was "some time later." (Genesis 40:1) Even after he interpreted the wine taster's dream, he was still in prison for another two years.

[11-prison bars] I wonder if Joseph got bitter. I wonder if the scene with his brothers played over and over his mind. I wonder if he despaired. What would you have done in those long, hard years, sold out by your own family, languishing in a prison, while you knew you were innocent? It's hard to say.

[12-Prince of Egypt] We do know this: God gave Joseph a second chance. He interpreted the pharaoh's dream, predicted a famine, and was promoted to second in command, so that the whole country could prepare and survive. After all these ups and downs, Joseph was in charge in Egypt.

[13-Joseph and his brothers] After a while, the famine was so severe that Joseph's brothers came to Egypt looking to buy food. When they got there, Joseph recognized them immediately, but the brothers did not know who he was. This is where the story gets interesting. Joseph did not reveal himself

immediately, but started messing with them. He put one brother in prison. He secretly put all their money back in their travel bags. Lastly, he framed his youngest brother, Benjamin, threatening to kill him or at least take him as a slave. Basically, Joseph did everything to make his brothers feel guilty for what they did to him, and it worked. Their guilt came back in all of its ugly power.

[14-Judah begs] As the brothers stood there, trembling and bowing before Joseph, finally, something happened that convinced Joseph that his brothers had changed. Judah said to him, “Don’t take Benjamin. Take me instead.” (Genesis 44:33) This was the final act of sacrificial love Joseph had been waiting for.

[15-scripture] Let’s read in Genesis 45, where Joseph reveals himself to his brothers.

Then Joseph could no longer control himself before all his attendants, and he cried out, “Have everyone leave my presence!” So there was no one with Joseph when he made himself known to his brothers. And he wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard him, and Pharaoh’s household heard about it.

Joseph said to his brothers, “I am Joseph! Is my father still living?” But his brothers were not able to answer him, because they were terrified at his presence.

Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.”

...Then he threw his arms around his brother Benjamin and wept, and Benjamin embraced him, weeping. And he kissed all his brothers and wept over them. Afterward his brothers talked with him. (Genesis 45:1-7, 14-15)

Joseph wept. Joseph forgave them. Listen to his words again: “What you intended for evil, God used for good. (Genesis 45:7)

[20-Joseph hugs Benjamin] How long did it take Joseph to realize what God had done? Ten, twenty years? When did he let go of his bitterness and forgive his brothers? When did he realize that God could work a miracle in his life? How many years and how many disappointments did he have to work through?

You see, Joseph had a choice. He could have had his revenge. He could have gotten even with his brothers. But instead of getting bitter, he got better. He wanted to see his brothers again, badly. Look at how he broke down in front of them and reconciled with them.

This is a picture of how God can reconcile our families and relationships. God does not want us to kill each other, or even pretend to kill each other. God does not want dysfunction. God does not condone abuse. No! God's plan is for us to live in healthy families. Whole families. Reconciled families.

[21-Broken world] We live in a broken world. We know that every single one of us has sinned against God and each other. Like Joseph, we have been separated from the relationships that God planned for us, both with God and with each other.

God created us for his family, and we hurt God and each other. But in spite of our misbehavior, God had a plan to save us. He saved us from the famine of living outside of his grace. But unlike Joseph, God doesn't test us. God offers us his grace freely, because Jesus has already paid the price.

[22-Repeat slide-Benjamin and Joseph] This is a story about reconciling, a story of rescue. The moment where Joseph weeps over Benjamin and his brothers is my favorite part of this story. This is exactly where our families can be, by the grace of God, forgiving each other and embracing each other. This is where God wants us to be. Forgiven and embraced by God.

It is not easy to forgive, especially when the hurt runs deep. It is not easy to let go of our thirst for revenge. Then again, it's not easy to understand how God can forgive us. We only know this: God loves perfectly. In the end, this story is as much about Joseph as it is about us and our families and relationships. How far are you willing to go to experience that moment of joy, that forgiveness?

[23-Repeat slide-God wants us to reconcile] Grace is available to us in any situation. Grace that surprises us, stuns us, and overwhelms us. Grace we can experience firsthand. Grace we can see with our eyes, grace we can hear with our

ears. I pray that in our families, in our relationships, and in our church, we will show the same grace and forgiveness than Joseph showed his brothers. God wants us to reconcile. Let's take the first step.

I invite you to join me in the prayer of confession on the screen.

Memory Verse:

1 Peter 4:8 (NIV) – “Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins.”

Reflection questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with your siblings? (Or your nearest relatives?)
2. Which is easier for you to forgive: family, friends, or strangers? Why?
3. Describe a tragic hurt that God used for good in your life.
4. How will we, the Church, allow the story of God's grace to break through our lives and rescue those around us?