

## ***Sibling Rivalry***

A Sermon for Sunday Morning Worship  
The Third Sunday of Stewardship Season  
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC

October 21, 2018

Text: Genesis 37:1-8

Joseph and his brothers – he had 11 of them – did not get along. He had sisters too but that’s a conversation for another time. For right now, we need to realize that the foundation of the story of Joseph, a pivotal one for Israel’s history, is grounded in the fact that Joseph and his brothers just didn’t like each other. At all. The text we read this morning which is the beginning of the entire Joseph saga gives us several different reasons why his brothers didn’t like him. One is that he tattled on them to their father Jacob. Apparently, they were doing something they shouldn’t have while working out in the fields. Joseph saw them goofing off or whatever and immediately ran to tell their dad.

Now let’s just pause right there for a moment. How many of you here with siblings used to find yourself in the same situation? *(pause)* So, tell the truth – were you the tattlee or the tattler? *(pause)* Okay, I confess. I was the tattler. Whenever my brother would have parties down in the “rec room” (remember those?), he would give me a quarter not to tell my dad when they turned the lights out. What he didn’t know was that my dad gave me a \$1 for telling me when they did. So, sometimes there’s a good reason for

tattling. Or sometimes, the sibling just wants to be a pain in the neck. Or sometimes, it's both. Ah, memories...

Another reason Joseph's brothers didn't like him was because their father, Jacob, blatantly loved Joseph the most of all his sons. The text admits this, saying it was because Joseph was the son of his old age, which is true enough. But, Joseph had a younger brother, Benjamin, so it wasn't that he was the youngest, born when his father was older. No, if we had read the earlier texts leading up to this morning's, we would know that Joseph was the eldest son of Rachel, Jacob's favorite wife (he had four). Jacob's youngest son Benjamin was also born to Rachel, but she died in childbirth with him so Benjamin had his own issues.

And there was yet another reason why his brothers couldn't stand Joseph. It seems Joseph had the knack of prophecy through the interpretation of dreams. Later on in his life, this ability to interpret dreams actually saved him and brought him into a prominent position. But, at this point, he seemed to do it just to annoy his brothers as much as he could. "Listen to my dream," he says to them. "We were out binding sheaves in the field and suddenly my sheaf stood upright and all your sheaves bowed down to me!" Yeah, right. Just what you want to say to your 10 older brothers who are already not your biggest fans. Now, I admit, I always wonder if he was trying to be annoying to his brothers or if he was truly so naïve that he just didn't realize

how that would sound to them. Maybe he really did have this strange dream and he was telling them about it just to see what they thought it meant. If he loved them, and looked up to them, it would be a natural thing to do. It's possible he was clueless about how they really felt about him. After all, if his father doted on him to such an extent, then he might honestly not suspect them of not liking him because as far as he knew everybody liked him.

But, such was not Joseph's reality, whether he knew it or not. As Joseph's story continues, his brothers finally get so angry with him that they end up selling him to a passing caravan! This sends Joseph on a series of adventures lasting decades which has him sold into slavery into the household of a rich Egyptian, Potiphar, whose wife tries to seduce Joseph. It doesn't work which makes Mrs. Potiphar so angry she accuses him of rape and he ends up in jail. But, he doesn't stay down long when he ends up befriending the jailer because of his knack of interpreting dreams. Eventually he has a chance to intervene in a nefarious plot to kill the Pharaoh and is rewarded by being hired as the Pharaoh's right hand man, in charge of much of the royal family's wealth and properties. It is at this point in the story that one of the classic plot twists of all time takes place when Joseph's ten brothers – the same brothers who had sold him into slavery decades earlier – end up coming to him for help when there is a terrible famine in their home country of Canaan. They don't know it's their brother Joseph whom they

believed to be long dead. But he recognizes them and decides to string them along for a bit, the annoying little brother visible once again. Ultimately, though, he tells them who he is and they beg his forgiveness. He tells them they have nothing to be sorry for because Joseph believed it was all meant to be. He explains that if his life had not happened as it did, beginning with them selling him to the caravan, he would not be in a position to help them as he was now.

So, the story of Joseph ends with his brothers and their families and his elderly father moving to Egypt so Joseph could take care of them all. The End, right? A happy, fairy tale ending, right? No, not hardly. Within two generations after Joseph had died, the same Egyptians who had befriended Joseph and welcomed all his family decided they had become a threat to the kingdom and they were all enslaved. And this is where Moses enters the picture. So, it is Joseph, then – annoying, bratty Joseph – whose sibling rivalry issues set the stage for Moses, the towering figure of the Old Testament, to come on the scene at last. Joseph and his brothers are the reason Israel found itself enslaved in Egypt instead of happily settled in their original homeland of Canaan. Who knew one bratty little brother could change the course of history? But he did...

The story of Joseph and his brothers stands alone in the Old Testament as a straightforward, cohesive story from beginning to

end. It is not repeated elsewhere, as other stories are. It is not epic in nature, like the Creation stories or the story of Noah and the flood. It's a story about a dysfunctional family whose problems we can understand and connect with because they are our issues too. We can understand sibling rivalry issues that get out of hand. We can appreciate finding yourself in desperate need of help, just like Joseph's brothers ultimately were, forcing you to turn for help to the person you'd like least to ask. We know what it is to have life completely and inexplicably turned upside down like Joseph's was when his brothers literally got rid of him.

Joseph's story is like our life stories whether we realize it or not.

As I consider this story of how it is that Joseph and his brothers became estranged from one another, I am struck by how much the current state of affairs in our country, in our world, looks and feels like sibling rivalries gone out of control. I know it's hard to think of the people we most disagree with when it comes to politics or religion or community issues as siblings, but in many ways, they are. We are all connected with each other, whether we like it or not, by our common human condition. We are all born needing parents to care for us and schools to educate us. We all need good food to eat and clean water to drink and decent places to live. We all need doctors to care for us when we're sick or injured. We all grow up needing to earn a living to provide for families of our own. We all make our way through life

with its ups and downs as best we can. Sometimes we get frustrated and angry about the way things are and other times we experience happiness and joy that we savor for however brief a time. Eventually we all grow older and need more assistance doing those things that used to come so easily. Still we need a place to live and someone to take care of us. And, at some point, we all reach the end of our earthly journeys leaving behind people we love and experiences that made us who we were. It is these things that make us siblings of a sort in this lifelong human experience. Truth is, we have far more in common than we realize, a fact we too often forget or overlook.

This is where I see such great value in Joseph's story for us today in a world so filled with contentiousness and anger. Joseph and his brothers did not like each other, we know that. Joseph provoked them with his fancy garment from their dad, one so like a royal robe his brothers were literally seething every time they saw him wear it. And he wore it all the time. His brothers, on the other hand, sold him into slavery just to get rid of him! Now that is a lot of anger. No, actually that is rage, mindless, thoughtless rage that put Joseph on a path that nearly cost him his life several times. Sound familiar? It should. If it doesn't, just turn on the nightly news for 10 minutes and you'll change your mind. Rage is everywhere these days, and it is nothing but destructive. Joseph and his brothers learned this far too late to prevent so much

heartache. True, God made it all work out in the end but, dear friends, we don't have to wait til the end of our stories to let go of our anger. We don't have to wait for God to fix it. We can't because I believe with all my heart that God is counting on us to fix it, to work on repairing the breaches which divide us. Joseph was able to do this because he wouldn't give up on God or himself. He used the gifts God gave him to make things better, eventually earning a position that enabled him to save his brothers, those very same brothers who literally got rid of him.

Dear friends, Joseph and his brothers found a way, individually and collectively, to move beyond their hate and build a new life together. They found a way to forgive each other and move forward together. I'm sure it wasn't easy. Nothing truly worthwhile ever is. But circumstances forced them into confronting their pointless, destructive rivalry and put it aside for the betterment of all. It seems to me that in our society, in our beloved country today, we all need to work a little harder to do the same thing. We need to turn down the volume on the angry name-calling on all sides and turn that energy into hearing each other into speech. Hearing each other into speech. Now that is really hard to do. It's difficult because to hear someone else, really hear them, you have to stop listening in order to formulate your own response. You have to start listening to hear what is being said. And, we have to work hard to remember that hearing

is not agreeing. Hearing is just hearing. It's giving someone the respect of listening to them so you can understand what it is they are so upset about. Make no mistake, this is some of the hardest work you will ever do. Ever. And you probably won't be able to do very much of it, because it's that difficult. But, it is so very important that you try.

So, as you head out into your week, I hope you will think about bratty, annoying Joseph and how much his brothers hated him, remembering as you do that with God's help they were able to repair the breach between them even though it took a lifetime. I hope you can find it in your heart to tune out the negativity all around you and focus instead on seeing the humanity of the people who are the most difficult for you to tolerate. I'm not asking you to like them. I'm not asking you to agree with them. I am asking you to recognize in them a beloved child of God just like you, because that's who they are. Dear friends, this is not easy or simple to do, but it is incredibly worthwhile because the truth is that if you can learn to see God in everyone, you will find God everywhere every day. If you can see God in someone you don't like, perhaps they'll be able to see God shining out through you and wouldn't that be just amazing?? Who knows what might happen then?? Amen.