

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Some of you might be familiar with the song “Which Side Are You On?” For those of you who aren’t it’s an old labor union ballad, and here’s a sampling of the lyrics: “Which side are you on? / They say in Harlan County / There are no neutrals there / You’ll either be a union man / Or a thug for J.H. Blair. / Don’t scab for the bosses / Don’t listen to their lies / Poor folks ain’t got a chance / Unless they organize. / Which side are you on?”

Regardless of where you fall on that particular issue, it’s still a stark and honest way to frame it, and it’s getting increasingly difficult to talk this way in America. These days, we want to say that we’re all on the same side in the end. We all have the same goals of fair access to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We think that if we just stopped name-calling and used our “inside voices,” we could work together and make some progress. Pointing out bad guys or naming someone as a “thug” isn’t fashionable anymore, and this is especially true in liberal circles. As a result, our cultural stories rarely feature real struggles for power. We have lots of city murals portraying people who have banded together for justice, but almost none depict the perpetrators of injustice. Understand that I’m reflecting on all of this as someone who has been going around convinced for a while that being Christian means learning to tell stories without “good guys” and “bad guys.” Lately, though, I’ve begun to suspect that this attitude has less to do with the influence of Jesus in my life, and more to do with the influence of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

It was our story from Genesis that got me thinking about all of this. This is a story about violence, but, if I may peek ahead just real quickly to our lectionary text for next week, it’s also a story about reconciliation. And I think it’s worth paying attention to the fact that the reconciliation in this story does not make sense. By that I mean that it does not come about through cool reason and open-minded respect for the other person’s point of view. Joseph and his brothers never have a sit-down and agree that they were seeking the same thing in the end after all, so all can therefore be forgiven. No, with very little psychologizing or explanation at all, the brothers repent, and Joseph forgives. There is reconciliation. If God is anywhere in this story, I think it is in the *miracle* of holding together these two things: (1) the frank recognition of real violence and (2) the gift of real reconciliation. And what that means for us in the church is that if we are to be people of real reconciliation—which is to say, if we are to be witnesses to the peace of Christ—we must learn to depend on God to perform that miracle over and over again.

I’m going to explain what I mean by “real” violence and “real” reconciliation, but first let me back up and give us a little context.

This story of Joseph is an important moment of transition in the wider story of Israel in that it sets the stage for the Exodus story. It carries the family of Israel out of the land of Canaan into Egypt, and it carries us the readers from the person of Israel, Jacob, to the people of Israel, Jacob’s descendants. That said, this story is much more than a bridge in a bigger story. This is the first real look we get at Jacob’s descendants, the budding people of Israel. From these sons will come the twelve tribes of Israel, God’s chosen people. The chapter we read from today is where it all begins. It’s not a great start.

What’s compelling in this story of beginning and of violence is the perspective from which the story is told. We’ve all heard the saying that the victor writes the history books. That saying is our recognition that we almost always learn about violence from the perspective of the victimizer, which means that *our*

violence is always justified. Either the victims were evil and deserved it, or the violence was made somehow necessary by being the lesser of two evils or something. Here, though, we learn about violence from the perspective of the victim. This is relatively common in the Bible, and what it always does is show us that the violence is *not* justifiable by any moral calculus. Stories by their very nature always invite us to place ourselves into the story, and so, here, we put ourselves in the place of victimized Joseph. Yes, he's a tattler and at 17 still kind of a brat and dad's favorite, but we are still able to see that there's no justification for his brothers plotting to kill him and eventually selling him into slavery. So that's the first interesting thing in this text—that Scripture invites us to see through the eyes of the victim in order to delegitimize violence.

There is a danger, though, in internalizing an identity grounded fundamentally in being a victim. It can easily become a shield to guard against any suggestion that we, too, are wrapped up in violence and in the systems that violence props up. That's why the second thing about this Joseph story that's even more important is that it will not allow us to internalize victimhood like that. This story will not allow us to pretend that we are only in the place of Joseph. We can't pretend that exactly because the brothers, the victimizers, are also one of *us*. Remember, the brothers eventually become the tribes of Israel. Israelite readers are immediately confronted with the fact that everyone in the story, victim and victimizer alike, is *us*. As Christians grafted onto the people of Israel, we also have to recognize that everyone in this story is *us*. We are always, at once, the victim who can see clearly the fact that the violence is not justifiable, and that we are the victimizers, committing that same violence. The effect is that this cannot be a story about how *we* behave versus how *they* behave. This is a story about how *human beings* behave.

And this story does point to a fairly universal experience of being human. The relationship dynamic that erupts into violence here is a triangle that we've all been a part of at some point. We have been the person who openly loved too exclusively and so created rivalry; we have been the one who is loved but only in the context of rivalry with others; and we have all been the one not loved enough in comparison to others. Can you see how this almost always ends in violence? Maybe, as in this story, that violence takes physical form, but more often it looks as innocent as buying a gym membership or asking for a promotion. Neither of these things is inherently bad, but if we do them in an effort to become better so as to belittle someone else—so that we, whose time at the gym makes us more beautiful than him, or whose promotion gives us more wealth or institutional power over her—then we are engaging in an attempt to dominate another person, which is at the very least the seeds of violence.

Probably many of us sense that we are currently in one of these triangles that lead to violence. What is so amazing about our Scripture this morning—what has me convinced that it is properly considered divine revelation—is that it won't let us camp out in just one corner of the triangle. If we could, maybe we could find a way to justify our corner, to make it the innocent one. But we can't. At some point in our lives, we will occupy every single one of those corners. You realize what this means. There's no way to protect ourselves from critique here. If we read honestly, recognizing ourselves in Jacob, and in Joseph and in Joseph's brothers, there's no way to avoid the recognition that we are, each of us, complicit in unjustifiable violence.

What this does *not* mean is that we all just dissolve into moral ambiguity then. Yes, our human identities are always a bundle of victim and victimizer, but that does not mean that those categories cease to matter in any given situation. What it does mean is that we cannot discern the good guys from the bad guys based on our usual methods for drawing those lines. That is, we can't base our naming of good and evil on nationality, or color, or gender, or sexual orientation, or church membership, or political affiliation.

Remember, everyone in the Joseph story is part of the same people of Israel. Even with that qualification, though, this is the part where I start feeling really uncomfortable, and I'd be willing to bet I'm not alone. Because I'm still talking about naming evil, about pointing the finger at thugs. Didn't we just read the parable of the wheat and the tares a couple weeks ago? Isn't God the only one who can judge?

In terms of the end of all things, yes. None of us can say with any certainty who will stand with Jesus in the kingdom of God. We can never presume to judge whom God names as God's own or whom God has chosen for God's purposes. As Scripture constantly reminds us, God tends to choose those whom we would least expect. That said, we *can* recognize when someone is exercising violence. Often we're blind to it, especially when we participate in it. But when we do see it, when we become convinced of it through conversation and prayer in community together, then we must name it for what it is—sin. When we refuse to do that, not only does oppression continue to happen, but the only peace that we can hope for is a false veneer of reconciliation.

To take one example of that, even something as clearly based in power and domination as the Jim Crow laws have been recast by people like Gunnar Myrdal, who staunchly supported African American rights, to appear as just a big misunderstanding. Myrdal considered the laws an “awkward and irrational contradiction” in Americans' hearts, easily corrected once we simply realized that the laws were not compatible with our commonly held ideal of equality.¹ That's a lie. Whether it was conscious in every case or not, those laws were a violent struggle for power and domination. Christians *cannot* lose our ability to name that. Even, or *especially*, when it is us inflicting the violence.

So if efforts like Myrdal's only offer a false veneer of reconciliation, how do we get to real reconciliation? The answer to that also lies in the Joseph story, because it doesn't end with violence. It ends, as we'll see next week, in reconciliation. *Real* reconciliation. Real reconciliation does not look like political alliances based in mutual benefit. It also does not look like the easy harmony of discovering that we really basically agreed all along, which is what Myrdal was trying to do. It certainly does not look like one side dominating or silencing the other. That's just more violence creating the temporary illusion of peace. As contradictory as it may seem at first, real reconciliation happens in the midst of a painfully honest recognition of real violence, of real difference.

Because of that, true peace looks less like happy harmony, and more like an unsettling. That's why in the story of reconciliation we'll read next week, we'll see so much intense weeping by Joseph and his brothers. What is being unsettled are those parts of our identity that we have built over against other people. When that part of our identity is unsettled, we open ourselves up to receive our identity freely from God. Joseph doesn't define himself as his brothers' victim anymore. He defines himself as God's chosen instrument. Joseph's brothers don't define themselves as Joseph's victimizers. They define themselves as God's forgiven and chosen instruments. They do not find that the violence done was understandable or excusable, but they do find, to their joy and astonishment, that it can be forgiven.

Now, I can't explain how that's possible. If it were forgiveness based in our human capacity to be open-minded or the ability to just redirect the source of our identity, that would be fine. That's something I can wrap my head around. It's something I can control. But while human efforts at peacemaking are good, and do much, our power in this is limited. We are not equipped to forge true peace in the face of real wrongs which cannot be justified, excused, or made understandable. And that this is the case, that there are real enemies out there—real bad guys that we can name and cannot force ourselves to reconcile

¹ Robin Marie Averbeck, “Why I'm Not a Liberal”

with—shouldn't really come as a surprise to us. Jesus never said we wouldn't have enemies. Jesus assumed we would have enemies, and he assumed that we would be able to name them, because he told us to pray for them.

But that last part is key. Jesus told us to pray for them because there is hope. There is hope for true peace and real reconciliation. This is why, as one professor of mine has pointed out, the Harry Potter books are far more Christian than the Narnia books. In Narnia, there is never any chance that the White Witch can be redeemed. But in Harry Potter, there is always the hope for redemption—for Snape, and Malfoy, and even Voldemort. But repentance, redemption and the reconciliation they bring only ever comes to us as pure gift. Notice in the liturgy for the passing of the peace, we are to show each other *signs* of peace and reconciliation. I think we can hear that as the recognition that we are not called to perform reconciliation. That is a miracle only God can perform. But we are called to witness to it by embodying toward one another signs of what we receive.

As one theologian I like puts it,² it's a precarious peace that we Christians witness to—precarious because it unsettles us, and precarious because we can't force it. But we can pray for it. And we can hope in it. And through our worship both in this place and out in the world, we are shaped into people who do not block this precarious, unsettling peace when it is offered, but people who are capable of receiving it with joy. Amen.

² Chris Huebner, *A Precarious Peace: Yoderian Explorations on Theology, Knowledge, And Identity*