

“God’s Meaning-Making Creatures”

Psalm 138; Genesis 45:3-15 – Rev. Rebecca Littlejohn
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Holy God, bless the speaking and the hearing of these words, that our hearts might be open to the movement of your Spirit and become vessels of your love and mercy. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

This is really only going to work if you know the backstory. So hopefully, you either remember the story of Joseph and his brothers from Sunday School, or you’ve seen the musical “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” at least once. I shall refrain from singing the whole thing to you, though you should know that I’m pretty sure I could and would like to, but we don’t have that kind of time.

Just in case anyone needs a refresher, here’s what we need to know: Joseph was one of the 12 sons of Jacob, and he was his father’s favorite. This was most likely because he was the firstborn son of the woman Jacob truly loved, as opposed to the older sister their father made him marry first or either of the enslaved women who also bore his children. Let’s not get bogged down in biblical “family values,” today; suffice it to say, there were some complicated family dynamics. Anyway, Joseph was the favorite son, and his father made this so painfully obvious, his 10 older brothers were consumed with jealousy to the point that they overpowered Joseph out in the wilderness and sold him into slavery, which brought him to Egypt. Through a dramatic series of events after that, and Joseph’s remarkable ability to interpret dreams, he became the right-hand man of the Pharaoh, so that by the time our story

today picks up, he is, indeed, more or less “lord of all Egypt.” Meanwhile, a seven-year drought had caused a great famine that stretched all the way back to Joseph’s homeland, which is what brought his brothers to Egypt, seeking assistance. After first testing whether they’ve become better people by framing his younger brother Benjamin for theft, Joseph then reveals his true identity in the scene we heard just now.

The main point of this backstory is that Joseph had a lot to hold against his brothers, if he’d wanted to. They’d beaten him up and sold him into slavery in a distant land, where he ended up also spending time in prison. The dynamics of his decision not to seek revenge are what I want us to explore today. Because Joseph’s story is just one example of how life goes: we often have unfair advantages or disadvantages, sometimes bad things happen, sometimes people do bad things to us, and sometimes good things happen that seemingly come out of nowhere. This is just the way life is. But one of the things about the way God made us humans is that we’re always trying to make sense of life, to assign meaning to the various events of our lives. And when we’re people of faith, we tend to bring God into that in ways that are helpful and in ways that are not helpful, just as Joseph did.

Joseph’s response to his brothers had two, related levels. At the most basic level, what’s important is that he forgave them and moved toward reconciliation. But beyond that, he also proclaimed to them that their actions in selling him into slavery, weren’t really the deciding factor in his life; in Joseph’s re-telling of the story, the

brothers were merely pawns in God's plan to get Joseph into Egypt so that he could save everyone from the famine, including his own family.

Would Joseph have been willing to forgive his brothers if he hadn't been able to see how their bad behavior could be part of God's plan? Would he have forgiven them if he were still in prison, if things hadn't worked out well? We can't know the answer to those questions. The problem with giving God credit for setting Joseph up as "lord over all Egypt," is that it requires also giving God the blame for Joseph becoming a slave and going to prison.

So then we have to decide how we want to deal with this question. Some people choose to minimize the problem by insisting that God's ways are not our ways, and sometimes things will seem like they don't make sense – like a loving God sending someone into slavery – because we're just not as wise and omnipotent as God. Others honestly believe in a God who does do things like send people into slavery as a way of "testing" their faith, and make it make sense that way. There is a strong desire within the human heart, as we relate to God, to feel as though God is definitively in charge and has a plan for everything. The question is whether our need to believe God has a plan for us is stronger than our belief that God is love, because those two things often end up in conflict. If we experience success in life and ascribe that to God's plan for us, it ought to make us wonder why God didn't plan for people who are struggling to succeed as we did. If we begin to assume it's because we are somehow more worthy or deserving, we're wandering into dangerous territory.

If we're convinced that everything happens for a reason and is part of God's plan, then our relationship with God can be seriously threatened when life gets hard. If a child dies, or our house burns down, or cancer strikes, and our inclination is to think God made that happen, our capacity to love and trust God can be damaged. Why would you love a god who gave you cancer?

The Bible is full of passages that give God credit and blame for the things that happen to people. The psalms are full of this sort of language. So it's important to think through carefully the sense in which those scriptures are true. I would suggest that they are true in the sense that they accurately portray a common human response to difficulty or success. But that is not the same thing as saying they're true in the sense that the writer is correct about God's responsibility for whatever good or bad thing happened.

A more helpful way of looking at this can be found in Romans, chapter 8, verse 28, where the New Revised Standard translation reads: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." And even more helpful translation is suggested in the notes about "other ancient authorities," which put it, "God makes all things work together for good," or "in all things God works for good." To apply this to Joseph's situation would allow us to say that God brought a happy ending out of the calamity of Joseph being sold into slavery, using the gifts and talents Joseph already had. This does not lay responsibility for Joseph being enslaved at God's feet, but does make room for God's good

intentions for Joseph's life. But if Joseph were to interpret the situation this way, would he still be able to forgive his brothers, or would he not be able to get past their responsibility for his years of suffering in slavery and prison?

This, to me, is where the real test of faith comes in. If we want to make room for God's intention in our lives, we have to be willing to live like Jesus, which means we are called to forgive, even when it's clear that someone was at fault. If we try to believe that God is truly responsible for everything that happens, there is nothing left to have to forgive our fellow human for, because nothing they did was really their fault. But if we proclaim that a loving God would never use the harmful behaviors of humanity for any purpose, no matter how mysteriously noble, we are confronted with a lot of damage and evil perpetrated by people we're called to reconcile with. Even if we allow room for God to work within those situations of difficulty and suffering, we can still identify human culpability, which means we're called to demand repentance and restoration, and eventually to offer pardon.

It is my guess that Psalm 138 was selected to accompany this story about Joseph forgiving his brothers because of the last verse: "The LORD will fulfill his purpose for you," it says. But it goes on, and I don't think we can leave off the rest if we want to properly understand how God fulfills God's purposes. "Your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever," the verse continues. "Do not forsake the work of your hands." God's purposes, God's intentions for us are grounded in steadfast love; that is the most important thing for us to understand in contemplating the true sense

in which God has a plan for our lives. That love will seep into the tiniest cracks or the most improbable sources in order to work for good in our lives. Things will not always be good, which is where the insecurity of that last plea that God not forsake us comes from. But God will always be working for good. And we cooperate with those intentions of blessing by being vessels for God's love and mercy as best we can in every situation. We let God's love work for good in the midst of our suffering by actively seeking to have the Holy Spirit shape our hearts with mercy and compassion and resisting the impulse to let our difficulties twist and deplete us into bitter, cynical husks. We let God's love work for good in the midst of our success by humbly acknowledging the privileges that allowed us to get where we are and sharing the blessings we have, while resisting the temptation to claim that our accomplishments are signs of our favored status or worthiness.

We really want our lives to make sense. God's created us as creatures who desire meaning, which is why we're able to be people of faith at all. But the most fruitful way for us to seek meaning is to live out Christ's call to love and grace, without worrying about the why's of what happens to us. As we open our hearts to the Holy Spirit's movement, we work in harmony with God's good intentions for creation. May compassion and mercy flow! Hallelujah and Amen!