

Luke 6:27-36 and Genesis 45:1-15

The story of Joseph is one of the longest stories in the Old Testament, and if you ask me, it's also one of the best. For starters, it has a great message about redemption and reconciliation. But I think it's also a good story for the character arc and development of Joseph.

Joseph, of course, is one of the twelve sons of Jacob, and thus the great-grandson of Abraham. And he's the favorite, daddy's favorite child. The reason is because he is the oldest son of Jacob's favorite wife. Jacob had four wives, and if you're going to have four wives, I guess you may as well have a favorite.

It's not his fault that he's the favorite, but it kind of seems like he's a bit of a brat about it. Early on in his story, all his brothers, except the baby of the family, Benjamin, who was his only full-blooded brother, are out tending the family flocks. And he's not with them. That makes me think that he's kind of taking advantage of his status.

And he's a dreamer. He has these dreams, and he sees a vision of all his brothers bowing down to him. That's not his fault that he has the vision, but maybe it would have been smarter to keep that dream to himself!

His brothers hate him, and they cook up a scheme to get rid of him. They're going to kill him out in the open country and then take back his bloody robe and tell Jacob they found it. "He must have been mauled by a wild animal." But the oldest brother, Reuben, intervenes to stop them from killing him. You have to do those kind of things when you're the oldest. I guess. Don't ask me, I was the youngest! Instead, Judah insists they should make a little money while they're getting rid of him by selling him into slavery. That does sound like the kind of thing my older brother would have done....

He ends up in Egypt, in the home of an official in Pharaoh's court named Potiphar. He demonstrates that he has skills for administration, and he is elevated to the position of head of the household. Things seem to be looking up until he is falsely accused by Potiphar's wife and thrown into prison.

In prison, he is again elevated to a position of responsibility. The jailer ends up letting him run the day to day affairs. Wherever he goes, people recognize his skills and he ends up in a position of responsibility.

I think there are two things happening here. First, he is being prepared for his life's work. He's going to become the administrator of all Egypt. God is preparing him for that work by putting him in places to learn how to do it. And I think there's

something encouraging there. We may find ourselves in places in our lives where we don't really want to be. Hopefully it's not slavery or prison, but still, we don't want to be there. It could be that God is using those experiences to teach us what we need to know for where we are going to end up in his plan.

The second thing that's happening is the development of his character. Joseph is learning humility. He doesn't seem very humble at the start of his story. And if he were to become second in command of Egypt without humility, that would probably end poorly. And I certainly think the story would not end the way it does without him learning humility. After what his brothers did to him, he would probably just have killed them outright. Difficult experiences can make us bitter. Or they can teach us humility. It very much depends on how we approach them.

Eventually, he comes to the attention of Pharaoh, who is also having dreams, for this ability to interpret their meaning. God has given him insight into the meaning of dreams, and he warns Pharaoh of a disastrous drought and famine that is about to begin. He is set free and becomes the viceroy of Egypt to prepare the nation for the famine. All that practice in administration is about to pay off in a big way.

In time, his brothers are sent to Egypt to buy grain from him. And then we have this cat and mouse game between him and his brothers, when they don't know who he is. I don't think he's "playing with them." I think he's out to see what has become of them since they sold him down the creek. And he discovers that they regret their actions.

He coerces them into returning with his youngest brother, Benjamin. And then he sets Benjamin up and tells them that Benjamin will stay in Egypt as his slave.

It's Judah who speaks up. Judah, the one who had the idea to sell Joseph into slavery, now insists on taking Benjamin's place as Joseph's slave.

And finally, at that point, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers. His famous line to them is, "You meant it for evil, but God used it for good." I don't think we should understand that to mean that their actions were any less wrong. Only that God is able to redeem bad situations to accomplish good.

And then Joseph embraces his brothers. The sins of the past are forgotten and there is reconciliation. Later on, after their father dies, his brothers are afraid that he was only showing them kindness for Jacob's sake, but if you go on to read the last chapter of the book, you find out that, no, Joseph meant it when he forgave them.

I think the story of Joseph pairs well with the Gospel text for today, from Luke 6.

Jesus says, "Love your enemies." The Old Testament Law commanded love for neighbor, but it did not specifically say such a thing for one's enemies. Jesus takes the principle further and insists, "Love your enemies, too."

Loving our enemies is not about our feelings. The biblical command to love is not about feelings. Love is an action, biblically speaking. To love our enemies is to choose to do good for them, to pray for them, to be kind to them, regardless of our feelings.

Jesus continues, "Do not return insults." A slap on the cheek was a grave insult in that culture. Jesus says, "Turn the other cheek."

"Give when you are asked, loan to those in need." The Old Testament Law forbade usury. Bible scholars debate whether usury meant charging any interest at all or only charging high interest. In any case, because the Law also required the forgiveness of debts in the Sabbath year, which was every seventh year, many people would not loan out when the Sabbath year was getting close. Jesus insists that we should loan even if we have no expectation of being repaid.

"Do for others as you would want done for you." Others have taught the "golden rule" as a negative. "Do not do to others what you would not want done to you." But Jesus makes it more challenging. The Jesus golden rule requires action. If you see your enemy in trouble, you are required to help. If you live by the negative rule, you have no such obligation. But Jesus gives us an obligation to help those in trouble.

"If you are only kind to those who are kind in return, you are no different than the world." That's one of the most basic principles of human society: Return kindness for kindness. And, typically, the other half of it is: Return injury for injury.

But if we are kind to our enemies, then we are unlike the world. Then we are acting like God, who is gracious both to those who love him and to those who hate and reject him. And if we do that, God will reward us. If we are only kind to those who are kind to us, then we have already received our reward. But if we return kindness for injury and insult, God will reward us, Jesus promises.