

Genesis 37:2-14a (NRSV)

“This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives; and **Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age**; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

“Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, ‘Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.’ His brothers said to him, ‘Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?’ So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

“He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, ‘Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.’ But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, ‘What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?’ So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

“Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, ‘Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’ So he said to him, ‘Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.’ So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.”

When I was very young, many of the first books that were read to me and that I could read were Bible stories published by Arch Books. They were simplified versions of classic Bible stories with vivid illustrations. I really liked them. It was through one of those books that I first heard the story of Joseph, his coat of many colors, and his brothers. When Andrew Lloyd Webber created his musical on the Joseph story—*Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*—I thought it was terrific. I’ve seen that show three times including when we took a group from church up to Boston. When our sons were young, we wore out the CD listening to the songs again and again. It’s hard for me to read portions of the Joseph story without hearing the music from that show. The story of Joseph occupies more than a dozen chapters at the end of *Genesis*, and I’m only going to be able to touch on a little bit of it today. **The aspect of**

Joseph's life that I want to highlight is how he responds when he's mistreated. Let's listen to another segment of the story.

Genesis 37:14b-28 (NRSV)

“He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, ‘What are you seeking?’ ‘I am seeking my brothers,’ he said; ‘tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.’ The man said, ‘They have gone away, for I heard them say, “Let us go to Dothan.”’ So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, ‘Let us not take his life.’ Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him’—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

“Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.”

I don't have any brothers, but I do have two older sisters, and they might even tell you I benefited from some favoritism when we were growing up because I was the youngest and the only son. In *Genesis 37*, we see that Jacob and his family put the “fun” in dysfunction when it comes to family dynamics. Remember Jacob and his brother Esau had a sibling rivalry that was fueled by their father Isaac favoring Esau, and their mother Rebekah favoring Jacob and scheming to deceive her husband on Jacob's behalf. The fact that Jacob has children with four different wives also complicates the relationships among those women and all their sons as well. When people tell me they stand for Biblical family values, I wonder if they mean like Jacob's family! What a mess. Jacob repeats the favoritism he grew up with by singling out Joseph as special. Some of us grew up with or may still be experiencing the consequences of either being mistreated or neglected or benefiting from being a parent's favorite. Jacob's parenting style is not one I recommend emulating. By singling out Joseph as his favorite, he actually makes life worse for Joseph, not better. A wise parent recognizes that children have different capacities, interests and gifts—and even if those may mean a parent has more in common with one child compared to another—it's critically important to help provide each child

with the support they need to be successful, and for every child to know that he or she is loved deeply and unconditionally.

On his part, Joseph could have benefitted from reading Andrew Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* because the combination of a 17-year-old young man bringing "a bad report" about two of his older brothers "to their father" (*Genesis 37:2*), along with being singled out with special parental love and gifts (*Genesis 37:3*) was a volatile mix. Joseph also lacked the lack of wisdom and awareness to realize the potential negative consequences of sharing his dreams with his brothers and father. It's great to have dreams, but sharing a dream at the wrong time can be dangerous. It's important to note that Jacob's favoritism and Joseph's immaturity had a role in how his brothers felt about him. However, it doesn't excuse their behavior. They openly talk of killing him, stripping Joseph of his beloved coat of many colors, throwing him in a pit, and then selling their brother into slavery for a mere 20 pieces of silver. Joseph may have been a pain in the neck younger brother, but he didn't deserve that fate.

When we've been mistreated, it's always wise to reflect on what lessons we can learn. However, it doesn't excuse the behavior of those who have mistreated or abused us whether they are family members or anyone else. It's important not to blame the victim for what has happened. We're told over and over that a key aspect of how Joseph responds to being mistreated is "The Lord was with Joseph," (see *Genesis 39:2, 3, 21, 23*). In the case of Joseph, this meant that the blessing of the Lord was on him in a special way that helped him to be successful. **For us, when we've been mistreated, it's important for us to believe the Lord is with us even when we've suffered in ways that might cause a person to question the very existence of God much less that God loves and cares about us. *Psalms 34:18* says, "The Lord is near to the broken hearted and saves the crushed in spirit." That's an important truth to hold onto.** It's also important to allow ourselves to be used by God to comfort the broken hearted and to support those who are crushed in spirit. Sometimes the question is not so much if the Lord is with us, but if we are with the Lord. Are we seeking to be near to God and inviting God to be the guiding force in our life?

BBC member George Metzgar recently shared a brief story with me. A boy asked his father, "What is the size of God?" The father looked up at the sky and saw a plane and asked his son, "What is the size of that plane?" The boy replied, "It's very small. I can hardly see it." Then the father took his son to the airport to see a plane up close, and as they approached the plane and looked through the window, the father asked, "How big is this plane?" The boy said, "Wow, dad, it's huge!" The father replied, "God's size depends on how close or how far you are to God. The closer you are, the greater and greater God will be in your life!" Joseph is close to God and the Lord is with him in all his circumstances even when he is mistreated.

In Egypt, Joseph is bought by Potiphar, the Captain of the guard, who had the wisdom to see that Joseph was talented and blessed by the Lord so he quickly gave Joseph authority to serve as the overseer of his entire household and all that he had. Things were looking as well as they could for someone who was a slave, but then Potiphar's wife started sexually harassing

Joseph and trying to get him to have an affair. Though he steadfastly refused to dishonor himself, Potiphar or his wife, she kept trying to force herself on him until she finally accused him of the very thing he refused to do; and while Joseph escaped with his life, he was sent to prison. **One terrible form of mistreatment is to be falsely accused and even punished for something you didn't do.** So it was for Joseph and he lost everything he had gained. Sadly, that's still the case more often than it should be with our own criminal justice system. Too frequently we hear the stories of those who have pleaded their innocence while they languished in prison for years before DNA testing or other evidence is finally produced that shows they weren't guilty, and they're allowed to go free. It is a terrible miscarriage of justice every time someone is mistreated in this way.

Even in prison (*Genesis 39, 21, 23*), "the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer." In no time, Joseph is running the whole prison and the chief jailer didn't have to worry about a thing. In *Genesis 40*, Joseph correctly interprets the dreams of two of Pharaoh's officers: his chief cupbearer (the person who would test a drink to make sure it wasn't poisoned before giving it to Pharaoh) and chief baker. He told the cupbearer he would be restored to his position and begged him (*Genesis 40:14-15*), "But remember me when it is well with you; please do me the kindness to make mention of me to Pharaoh, and so get me out of this place. For in fact I was stolen out of the land of the Hebrews; and here also I have done nothing that they should have put me into the dungeon." You want to hear something awful? *Genesis 40:23*, "Yet the chief cupbearer did not remember Joseph, but forgot him." And Joseph languished in prison for two more whole years until Pharaoh had a dream no one could interpret and the ungrateful chief cupbearer finally comes to his senses and says (*Genesis 41:9*), "Then the chief cupbearer said to Pharaoh, 'I remember my faults today,'" and he tells Pharaoh about Joseph and the rest is history. Joseph is brought to Pharaoh, interprets the dreams, which show there will be seven good years followed by seven lean years; and Joseph is the man with a flair for economic planning who Pharaoh chooses to lead them through the crisis.

Among his brothers, in Potiphar's house, and in prison, Joseph is mistreated, falsely accused, and forgotten, yet the Lord was with him and his relationship with the Lord sustained him even in his most painful and despairing moments and circumstances. Imagine being betrayed and sold into slavery by your brothers; being accused and imprisoned when you are innocent and blameless; of helping others and then feeling forgotten and abandoned. How does a person find the resilience to overcome such circumstances—faith is a huge part of it.

About forty of us at BBC spent time over the last three weeks reading and discussing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail" which is revealing and convicting about the African-American experience in America. Dr. King was very familiar not only with being personally mistreated, but with the horrendous treatment of African-Americans in this country and on this continent for hundreds of years. Dr. King would have been 90 years old on January 15 if he had lived. It's hard to believe he was only 39-years-old when he was murdered. He accomplished so much, and wrote and said so many powerful, profound, inspiring, and

convicting sermon, speeches, letters, and books. King states in the Letter, **“So the question is not whether we will be extremists, but what kind of extremists will we be. Will we be extremists for hate or for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice or for the extension of the justice?”** He challenges the church, **“There was a time when the church was very powerful—the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society.”** He then asks, **“Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?”** As we observe the holiday that honors Dr. King and his life’s work on behalf of those who have been mistreated, it’s important for us to ask ourselves individually and as a church how we can help those who are suffering right now and being mistreated whoever they are and wherever they are. BBC member Jerry Cerasale told me how he remembered a sermon he heard about Joseph many years ago, and how the preacher noted the man who gave Joseph directions in *Genesis 37* and helped him find his brothers. Although that didn’t turn out great, there is a deep spiritual truth to grasp that we all have a role to play in helping those who are lost and seeking to find their brothers and sisters to discover their larger family. And we only get one chance at life to do what we can for others with the Lord’s help.

Pulitzer Prize winning poet **Mary Oliver** one of America’s best-loved and best-selling poets—who lived in Provincetown for many years and whose writing Jill and I appreciate; we have many of her books—died this past Thursday at the age of 83. She turned to poetry early in life to escape a painful childhood in which she was mistreated, and it was then that she began her practice of taking walks in nature.

As we experience a winter storm, I want to share one of her best known poems,

The Summer Day

Who made the world? Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper? This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down

into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do

with your one wild and precious life?

When we've been mistreated, one of the ways we can re-orient our mindset, outlook and attitude is to remind ourselves that we have just "one wild and precious life," and we're called to make the most of it and get the most out of it. When we're mistreated as Joseph was, as so many minorities have been, we can look at Christ and remember that he was the Son of God, without sin. He devoted his life to teaching, healing, comforting, inspiring, and helping others—and he was as mistreated as a person could be. No one was treated more unfairly than Christ who was scorned and scoffed at, mocked, beaten, and crucified. Yet through his wounds, we are forgiven and healed. Like Christ we're called to do what we can to help those who are suffering and being mistreated, and to intervene when and where we can. Like the man who told Joseph where to find his brothers, may we help others to find their way to seeing we are all sisters and brothers in the family of God.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What role does parental favoritism play in the relationship of Joseph and his brothers? Did you experience or notice favoritism as a child? What can parents learn from how Jacob treated his children?
2. Have you had any dreams you felt were messages from God? Can you recall one or two specifically? What happened in the dream? What happened after you awoke or later on? Why might God have given these dreams to Joseph or your dreams to you?
3. While he was working for Potiphar, Joseph resists temptation and maintains his integrity only to be falsely accused of the very thing he refused to do. Why is it so difficult to defend oneself against false accusations? How does Joseph cope?
4. During his imprisonment, Joseph continues to strive to use his gifts and abilities. He asks one of the persons he helps, the chief cupbearer to Pharaoh, to remember him when he regains his position of influence. Although the man agrees, he fails to act and Joseph continues to languish in prison. How have you dealt with situations in which people have mistreated you by failing to keep their word or their promises?
5. Looking back on his life, how does Joseph's faith help him to deal with mistreatment by his brothers, who are still telling him lies right to the end, and others (*see Genesis 50:15-21*)?
6. When you have been mistreated in some way, what has helped you to overcome it?