

Date: SEPTEMBER 14, 2014
Scriptures: Genesis 50:15-21; Romans 14:1-12
Title: The Moral Arc and Justice
Thesis: "The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends towards justice." Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

I love to hear stories about families.
They are so complicated
and have so many unexpected twists and turns.
That's because families are complicated.
We have to be part of a family
to know **exactly how** it's complicated.
We have boots on the ground.
Yet, being part of the family can and does blind us
to the part we play
in the family dynamics.
From the time we are born,
our family shapes us.
Our family influences our development
just as the dynamics of their parent's families
shaped them.
It is this process
that both gives families their stability
and makes them resistant to change.

Joseph's family was complicated.
Some might even say a bit dysfunctional.
Joseph was the next to youngest son of Jacob
and his father's favorite of the twelve boys.
Jacob should have known better
than to play favorites.
His father, Isaac, had favored
his older brother, Esau, over him.
Jacob knew what it felt like to be second best,
to have your father prefer another child over you.
But, sitting at his father's knee,
Jacob had been molded
by powerful, unseen forces.
Playing favorites was Jacob's normal
so he didn't give his behavior a second thought.
He didn't stop to examine

how it might impact
his sons' relationships with one another.

Eventually, Jacob did something so over-the-top
it turned ten of his sons against Joseph.
He gave him a beautiful, multi-colored coat.
The coat announced to the world
what the brothers knew
but until then did not have
to acknowledge publicly.

It announced
that Joseph was the apple of his father's eye.
That announcement made Joseph's brothers see red.
A short time later,
Joseph did something
that caused his brother's simmering anger
to flash out of control.

He told them
that he had dreamed
they would one day
bow down to him.

To make matters worse,
Joseph told them not once but twice.

Joseph's dreams shattered the fragile truce between the brothers.
They were the proverbial straw
that broke the camel's back.

His brothers plotted against him
and in an opportune moment
sold him to traders bound for Egypt.

The brother's deceit did not stop there, however.

They told their father
Joseph had been mauled to death by a lion
and showed him Joseph's purported blood-soaked garments.

Taken to Egypt,
Joseph was sold to the highest bidder.
Joseph, however, was different from most slaves.
He had the unique ability to interpret dreams.
His ability became known to the Pharaoh,
who discerning talent when he saw it,

made him his chief advisor.
As the second most powerful person in Egypt,
Joseph was able
to prepare Egypt
for the famine he had predicted.

It came to pass exactly as Joseph had foretold.

After five fat years,
a terrible famine gripped Egypt
and much of the Lower Mediterranean.

Unlike the starving people in other countries,
the Egyptians were well fed.

Word soon spread
that Egypt had vast storehouses of food.

Starving people near and far
began to make their way to Egypt.

Joseph's ten brothers were among them.

Jacob had sent them to buy grain
to save his family.

After a series of convoluted interactions,
Joseph came to believe
that his brothers regretted their cruelty to him.

Eventually, he revealed himself to them.

He sent them home
to convince Jacob
to move his family to Egypt.

Wanting to see Joseph once more before he died,
Jacob took everything he had
and with his family went down to Egypt.

There he lived in comfort and security
as Pharaoh's honored guest.

At last,
after many long years of separation and alienation,
Jacob's family seems settled
and at peace with one another.

But, death upsets
even the most stable families.

The death of anyone in the family destabilizes it.

The more important the person,
the stronger is the impact of the death.

So, it is with Jacob's complicated family.

Seventeen years after settling in Egypt,
Jacob dies.

Not unexpectedly, his death causes turmoil in the family,
most especially among Joseph's ten older brothers.

They wonder
if Joseph really has forgiven them
for what they did to him.

They remember they never apologized
or asked for forgiveness
for what they did to him.

They fear he might have waited
until after their father's death
to exact his revenge.

So, they get together and concoct a plan
they hope will safeguard their lives.

They decide to tell Joseph
that their father's deathbed wish
was for him to forgive them of the wrong
they did to him. (Genesis 50:17).

Decades had passed
since the brothers plotted against Joseph
and exacted their revenge on him.

By the time they went to Joseph
hat in hand to save their family from starvation,
they were changed men.

They had come to realize the wrong they had done to him.

They had also come to understand
that relationship with family
is gift of God
a gift to be valued and protected.

Sadly, after Jacob's death,
the brothers return to their old ways
of plotting and planning,
manipulating and lying.

In stressful times,
times of fear and anxiety,
we frequently revert
to more immature forms of behavior.

That is exactly what Joseph's brothers do.
They revert to their old patterns
of dealing with him.

When Joseph hears the story of their father's deathbed wish,
he begins to weep.
He weeps because he has compassion on them.
He sees they have lived with the heavy burden of their guilt and shame,
and he knows the guilt and shame have prevented them
from truly trusting him.

Seeing Joseph begin to cry,
the brothers think
things are not going well for them
so they offer to be his slaves.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave
when first we seek to deceive. (Sir Walter Scott).

The irony of the situation
cannot have been lost on Joseph.
Thirty years earlier,
he had prophesized
his brothers would bow before him.

Now, here, they are bowing before him.
If he were not changed men,
Joseph might have taken them up
on their offer to serve him.

But, he is a changed man.
He is no longer
the spoiled, arrogant, narcissistic child
he once was.

In Egypt,
far away from home and hearth,
away from family dynamics set in motion
long before his birth,
away from parents who play favorites
and intense sibling rivalry,
away from all of that,
Joseph changed.

He came to see
that he played a role
in what happened to him,

and he developed a close relationship
with the God of his father, Jacob,
and his grandfather, Isaac,
and great-grandfather, Abraham.

It is Joseph's close relationship with God
that makes it possible for him to tell his brothers
he will provide for them and their little ones.

In effect, he tells them
he harbors no anger for them
and will not return
their vengeance with vengeance.

If Joseph's story ended here,
we would say his family lived happily ever after.

But, the story does not end here.

What moves the story forward
is Joseph's statement of faith
to his brothers.

He says to them,
"You intended it for evil,
but God intended it for good
in order to bring about this present result,
to preserve many people alive."

He proclaims
to them and to all future generations,
who hear or read these words,
that God works for good
". . . in the midst of all the intentional
and unintentional harm we do."

(Timothy R. Cargil, Homiletical Perspective, *Feasting on the Word*, V. 4, p.)

Our actions and reactions do matter.
They can and do impact our own lives
and the lives of many others.

Yet, thanks be to God,
our actions and reactions do not have final say.

God is ever-present in the world
working to promote
compassion, forgiveness, justice.

We participate in this important work
through our relationships
both with God and one another.

Creating new hearts,
changing old patterns of behavior
takes time,
but we can be sure God is active in the world.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. once said,
“The arc of the moral universe is long,
but it bends towards justice.”

The day is surely coming
when justice will flourish
and all the families of the earth
will live together in harmony.

This day and every day may each of us commit
to weaving our personal story
into God’s ongoing story
and doing our part to promote justice. Amen.