

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 fathers 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.