

**“Good from Evil?”**

**Genesis 45:1-11**

**September 3, 2017**

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About 16 years ago, Erin and I celebrated our anniversary by visiting New Orleans. We had a wonderful time in the city, but we also took time to drive outside the city up the River Road. This road runs along the Mississippi and goes past several restored plantation houses. Many of these are open for tours and so we stopped to look at several of these grand old houses. I was interested to see that each of the houses had small outbuildings that were really just bedrooms and maybe a sitting room. There were as ornately finished as the rest of the house, so they were obviously not slave quarters, but they were separated from the main house. We were told that these were called “garconiers,” a French word signifying a small house for a young man. It turns out that in some wealthy plantation families in those days before the Civil War, young men when they reached their teenage years, were expected to move out and live separate from the rest of the family so that their nighttime activities, their comings and goings, would not disturb the rest of the family. As parents of a 14 year old son at the time, our thought was “What a great idea!” You see, I wouldn't say I'm a lot like Jacob, but like him, I have a favorite son. My only son, in fact. But I might say that he is a lot like Joseph. I think sometimes in his teenage years he often didn't have a filter between his brain and his mouth, telling him what was appropriate to say and what wasn't. Teenaged young men can be difficult, young women too, but our young man was way more difficult than his sisters. In fact his sisters would often look at him and say, “Brandon, do you realize you said that out loud?” All teenagers have many issues they need to work out, lots of discovery to do. Their emotions are fully developed, but their reasoning and impulse

control are not yet as fully formed as they will be later. Putting them out of the house and letting them do whatever they want may be a bit drastic, but there's something to be said for it.

We've heard how Joseph was an obnoxious teenager and obviously had no impulse control.

Why else would he be foolish enough to tell his father and his brothers about the predictive dreams he's been having about how he will rule over them? He needs to be removed to a garconier for a few years. However, his brothers do something more drastic than that. They sell him into slavery in Egypt, tear his clothes and soak them with blood, telling their father that he must have been killed by a wild animal. Joseph becomes a slave in Egypt, but when he offends his master, he is thrown into prison for many years. By the time he interprets the dreams of the king and gets put in charge of all the food distribution during the great famine, he is now a man in his thirties, with a wife and children of his own. But then one day his brothers appear before him seeking food. What will he do? They don't recognize him, maybe they barely remember him. But he remembers them. He remembers being sold into slavery, he remembers the years he was in Pharaoh's prison. Here's his chance for revenge. But he has grown up. He's not a foolish teenaged boy with clouded judgment any more. We can tell that because Joseph makes an amazing statement. He could have thrown them all in prison. He could have enslaved them, just to experience what he had all those years. He could have said, "I forgive you for the sake of our father but you were real jerks. Take the food and go, I never want to see you again." We wouldn't have thought any worse of him if he had done that. But he doesn't. He said, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life."

That's a man of mature faith who can say that. I don't know that I could say it. Because that statement deals with the most difficult issue that we have when it comes to our covenant with

God, in our relationship with God, even in our belief in God. Can God use evil events for his good purposes? Can good come from evil? Selling Joseph into slavery and telling Jacob that he was dead, was evil. Did God intend that to happen? Did God will that evil event because he knew that the famine was coming years in the future, and this was his method for getting Jacob's family to a place where they could be safe? If that's true, doesn't it mean that God causes evil?

Like lots of you, I have been watching the events in Texas this week in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey. I have been especially touched by all the outpouring of help from neighbors to other neighbors in need, by the folks who have traveled there from all over because they have the means to help, folks like the Cajun Navy from Louisiana who have been through things like this before. And people are being rescued from their homes and nobody cares what race or religion or orientation or legal status they have. Someone said to me the other day, "It's too bad that something like this has to happen in order for us to realize that we are all God's children."

Maybe God intends things like this so we can learn this lesson. But that's an awfully hard lesson if people have to die, if people have to lose their homes, if we have years of reconstruction ahead of us for God to teach us that simple lesson. You may even hear some people say that a hurricane like that is a punishment for our sins, that God sends destructive forces on our nation because of our immorality. I can't tell you why things like this happen, but to blame God for the deaths of the innocent is not something that I can take. It's not a Presbyterian belief, it's not a Christian belief.

I don't believe that God intends evil to happen. I believe that God can use evil, that's difficult enough. But God using evil is different from God intending evil events. I have a hard enough time realizing that God allows evil to happen. I often wonder why God doesn't stop evil events, storms, disease, the choices of evil people. But if I choose to do evil, God won't stop me. I don't

understand that. But I come close when I realize that God does use the bad that that happen to us in our lives to teach us, to help us grow, and can even turn them to good. Episcopal priest Rick Morely says, “what the story of Joseph exemplifies is the notion that God does not promise to take away all possibility of pain and discomfort—but rather God promises to be with us through it all. God promises to make great things happen, but not all great things come easily.

Some great things come in a manger. Some great things happen after hasty trips to Egypt. Some terribly wonderful things happen on an old rugged cross.”<sup>1</sup>

When bad things happen to us, I can’t believe that God has caused them. But I do believe that God stands beside us giving us strength to endure. And I even believe that God can take what is evil and use it for good.

“Note that Joseph does not attribute the brothers' sinful actions to God. God did not make them sin: "I am your brother Joseph, whom *you* sold into Egypt" (emphasis added). Joseph does, however, affirm that God was able to use those sinful actions for God's own purposes. The brothers devised evil, but God turned it to good. Note also that God's will is for the preservation of life, the life of the family of Jacob (45:7) and, indeed, the lives of many people, including the Egyptians (41:56-57; 50:20). Joseph's presence in Egypt is the means by which God ensures that human life will go on, even in the face of famine.”<sup>2</sup> That’s what this sacrament affirms. Even in a broken body, God’s presence is promised to us. God is with us, no matter what. Even in the face of a hurricane. In our study of covenant, we have constantly affirmed that God is with us. And our covenant with each other should reflect that too. God is not punitive, and neither should we be. God stands with us in times of trouble. And so should we with each other. Even when

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1 Morely, Rick. *A garden path*. August 14, 2011.

2 Schifferdecker, Kathryn. *WorkingPreacher.org*. August 17, 2008.

we make mistakes, even when we disagree. Even in the face of illness or divorce or conflict. No matter what. God does. So should we.