

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“Overflowing Grace” (Genesis 50:15-21)
September 13, 2020
Dave Johnson

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Today’s Old Testament passage is from the final chapter of the first book of the Bible, Genesis. It is a passage of overflowing grace, overflowing kindness toward those who least deserve it.

The outpouring of this overflowing grace took place in the context of one of the most difficult and challenging of dynamics, something most of us can relate to, sibling rivalry. Anyone who has a brother or a sister, or half-brother or half-sister, or stepbrother or stepsister—or anyone who has parented more than one child—has had to deal with sibling rivalry. Even only children are often rivals with cousins, or perhaps with the children of their parents’ friends. Sometimes sibling rivalry is funny or silly, and hilarious hijinks ensue (I could tell you some hysterical stories about the sibling rivalry among my own kids—but I will keep those stories to myself because I would like to remain on good terms with them). But sometimes sibling rivalry it is just plain toxic and goes from the cradle to the grave—or even beyond the grave when siblings are left out of a will or “punished” for not stepping up to help their parents more.

Some siblings may be best friends, while others may have an ebb and flow in their relationship, while with still others may only see their siblings at family weddings or funerals—or maybe not even then, I could tell you plenty of stories along these lines. Some of you may be very close to your siblings, or at least some of them, while some of you may have very little or nothing at all to do with your siblings.

The currents of sibling rivalry can run very deep and over the course of many years. Growing up, who got better grades? Who was the better athlete? Who had a higher SAT score? Who caused their parents the most stress or created the most family drama? Who got married first? Who got divorced first? Who had the most successful career? Whose children get better grades? Whose children are the better athletes...on and on the cycle goes. On a deeper level, the root of sibling rivalry usually comes down to one thing: who was their parent’s favorite.

This was the exact dynamic with Joseph and his brothers. You may remember that Joseph was one of Jacob's twelve sons, the older of two boys mothered by Jacob's favorite wife, the lovely Rachel. Jacob never made any attempt to hide the fact that Joseph was his favorite son, so much so that he gave Joseph—and only Joseph—a beautiful and expensive coat of many colors. Joseph wore his coat all the time, so that every single time his brothers saw him, they were reminded yet again that their father simply loved Joseph more than them. It became so heated, so dysfunctional that as the writer of Genesis put it: “when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him” (Genesis 37:4).

Joseph's brothers also resented him because of something else: dreams Joseph had which he shared with them, including this one: “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.” So winsome! His brothers were less than blessed and responded, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” (Genesis 37:6-8). Joseph could not take a hint and so later he shared with them a second dream: “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me” (Genesis 37:9). Of course, the “eleven stars” in this dream represented Joseph's eleven brothers, all bowing down before him. As you could imagine, this added more fuel to the fire so that as the writer of Genesis put it, Joseph's brothers “hated him even more because of his dreams and his words” (Genesis 37:8).

This toxic sibling rivalry grew worse, much worse. One day Jacob sent Joseph into the pastures to check on his brothers, “Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring word back to me” (Genesis 37:14). As his brothers saw Joseph approaching from a distance they actually conspired to kill him, but then following the advice of the oldest brother Rueben, they stripped Joseph of his coat of many colors and threw him into a pit instead, of course, with no water. Then while Joseph was in the pit, his brothers started eating, having a literal picnic, and they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites (the Ishmaelites were descendants of Ishmael, the older half-brother of Abraham's beloved son Isaac, Jacob's father...you see the pattern), and sold their own brother Joseph into slavery. And yet again, this sibling rivalry grew even worse.

Joseph's brothers took his coat of many colors, dipped it into the blood of a slaughtered goat, and then took it to their father and as they handed it to him actually had the gall to tell him, "This we have found; see now whether it is your son's robe or not." And as you would expect, at the news, complete with blood soaked evidence that his favorite son was dead, Jacob's heart broke in two, and he cried out, "It is my son's robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces" (Genesis 37:31-33). And guess how long each and every one of Joseph's brothers kept that horrible secret as they watched their father's spirit slowly wither away from his unutterable grief? Twenty years.

But God took care of Joseph, so much so that even after being put into prison in Egypt, through a series of events overseen by God's providence, Joseph rose all the way to being second in authority over Egypt, second only to Pharaoh himself. Later, as seven years of famine ravished that part of the world, Jacob sent Joseph's brothers to Egypt for food. And still later in one of the most moving passages in all scripture, Joseph revealed his identity to his brothers, and they reconciled, and the tears flowed and flowed. Even Jacob not only got to see his son Joseph again, but even Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. But when Jacob died, Joseph's brothers became afraid, very afraid. And in today's passage we see what Joseph's brothers did out of their fear, and how Joseph responded:

Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died, 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them (Genesis 50:15-21).

Joseph's brothers had hated him so much that they "could not speak peaceably to him", had hated him so much they ripped off his coat of many colors and threw him in a pit, and had hated him so much they convinced his father Jacob his favorite son was dead—and covered it up for twenty years. And yet, after their father Jacob had died, when Joseph had the perfect opportunity to exact revenge on his brothers, when from a worldly point of view his revenge could be easily justified, when Joseph's brothers were literally doing the very thing he had dreamed about many years earlier as they bowed before him weeping and begging for mercy...Joseph gave his brothers overflowing grace.

Joseph could tell his brothers were very afraid, but instead of letting them wallow in their fear, he reassured them, "Do not be afraid...have no fear." And Joseph did not stop there, he continued, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." And Joseph did not stop there, he continued giving his brothers overflowing grace, "I myself will provide for you and your little ones" and as the writer of Genesis beautifully put it, "In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them." Joseph forgave his brothers. Joseph assured his brothers that God was working it all out for good. Joseph provided not only for his brothers but also their families, and Joseph spoke kindly to them—no lectures, no "I-told-you-so's", no begrudging, no catch.

Joseph responded to his brothers' toxic sibling rivalry with overflowing grace.

And what Joseph endured from his brothers, and how Joseph responded, all foreshadowed what Jesus would do for you, and me, and the whole world.

Scripture tells us that in Jesus Christ God has given all of us "grace upon grace" (John 1:16), overflowing grace. At his incarnation Jesus himself bowed down before the world, the same world he created and the same world that responding with hate. The world hated Jesus so much that in his passion he was stripped of his own robe and then stripped of the purple robe given him in jest. The world lied about Jesus, falsely accused him of blasphemy, sold him out for the actual thief Barabbas, and nailed him to a cross. And yet just as Joseph responded with forgiveness, so did Jesus, "Father, forgive them," Jesus prayed, "for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23:34).

And when the Risen Jesus appeared to his disciples, each and every one of whom had forsaken Jesus when he was arrested and had run away, each and every one of whom was afraid, very afraid, Jesus spoke kindly to them, “Peace be with you...peace be with you...peace be with you” (John 20:19, 21 and 26). Even though the world had intended harm for Jesus, God intended his suffering and death for the good of that same world, including you.

God has forgiven you. God will work out everything for your good. God always responds to you the same way Joseph responded to his brothers, with overflowing grace.

Not only that, God’s overflowing grace also supersedes all sibling rivalry—as we read in scripture, “The one who sanctifies (Jesus) and those who are sanctified (us) all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters” (Hebrews 2:11).

In other words, God’s overflowing grace means *you* are God’s favorite.

Amen.