

# Trinity United Methodist Church

August 9, 2020

## “Dinner Amidst Disaster”

Rev. Greg West

### Scripture: Genesis 37:1-4 (NIV) and 37:12-28

Well, church, today we get to talk about dysfunctional families. Woo hoo! You know what I love about the Bible? It doesn't try to pretty things up or sanitize things. It's a mess. This book is a mess. But it tells it as it is. We read it and then we say, “I can relate to that mess, because I've been that mess. There's hope for me.”

I remember before I was converted, my mom was trying to talk to me about dysfunctional families, and I remember saying, “Mom, you probably think every family in the world is dysfunctional.” And those words have come back to haunt me, because yes, that's true. We're all in need.

So we're in Genesis 37, and we'll have verses 1 through 4, but we'll also have verses 12 through 28. Receive this story.

**1** Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan. **2** This is the account of Jacob's family line. Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them. **3** Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. **4** When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.

**12** Now his brothers had gone to graze their father's flocks near Shechem, **13** and Israel said to Joseph, “As you know, your brothers are grazing the flocks near Shechem. Come, I am going to send you to them.” “Very well,” he replied. **14** So he said to him, “Go and see if all is well with your brothers and with the flocks, and bring word back to me.” Then he sent him off from the Valley of Hebron. When Joseph arrived at Shechem, **15** a man found him wandering around in the fields and asked him, “What are you looking for?” **16** He replied, “I'm looking for my brothers. Can you tell me where they are grazing their flocks?” **17** “They have moved on from here,” the man answered. “I heard them say, ‘Let's go to Dothan.’” So Joseph went after his brothers and found them near Dothan. **18** But they saw him in the distance, and before he reached them, they plotted to kill him. **19** “Here comes that dreamer” they said to each other. **20**

“Come now, let’s kill him and throw him into one of these cisterns and say that a ferocious animal devoured him. Then we’ll see what comes of his dreams.” **21** When Reuben heard this, he tried to rescue him from their hands. “Let’s not take his life,” he said. **22** “Don’t shed any blood. Throw him into this cistern here in the wilderness, but don’t lay a hand on him.” Reuben said this to rescue him from them and take him back to his father. **23** So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe—the ornate robe he was wearing—**24** and they took him and threw him into the cistern. The cistern was empty; there was no water in it. **25** As they sat down to eat their meal, they looked up and saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead. Their camels were loaded with spices, balm and myrrh, and they were on their way to take them down to Egypt. **26** Judah said to his brothers, “What will we gain if we kill our brother and cover up his blood? **27** Come, let’s sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood.” His brothers agreed. **28** So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites, who took him to Egypt.

## Sermon

I want to give you a little background, because we’ve heard in this text the story of a dysfunctional family, but it didn’t start with them. You can trace dysfunction backwards. It usually comes down the line. So a little review. We have Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. No mention usually of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel, plus the other wives. But Jacob is the one who becomes Israel. He’s renamed because he wrestles with the angel of the Lord, and becomes named Israel, one who struggles or wrestles with God. Jacob, Israel, has twelve sons, who then become the twelve tribes of Israel.

So Jacob’s father and mother, Isaac and Rebecca—they’ve had some serious dysfunction as well, that we see carried on. They played favorites with their sons. It says of Isaac and Rebekah that as their boys grew up and Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the open country, and Jacob was content to stay at home among the tents-- Isaac, who had a taste for wild game, loved Esau, but Rebekah loved Jacob. Come on, Mom and Dad! Come on.

So Dad loves the outdoorsman, the rugged Esau. He’s hunting, and he’s the man’s man. And Jacob’s more quiet, and he’s more of the homebody, and Rebekah says, that’s my guy. Parents: Don’t play favorites with your kids. Just doesn’t go well, does it?

So you might remember the story. Rebekah, the mom, and Jacob, the son, trick Dad into giving him the blessing. Esau was the oldest, he was supposed to get the blessing, but his own wife and son trick him into giving *him* the blessing. He can’t see;

he's old. I always find this passage interesting. Esau is so mad he wants to kill his brother. Sound familiar? It's a repeat in a little bit of a way. We know that Esau had already married two Hittite women, and it drove Rebekah crazy. She did not like them. And she commands Jacob not to marry any of the Canaanite women.

And then the scripture says this (think dysfunctional family, right?): "Esau then realized how displeasing the Canaanite women were to his father and mother, and so he married two more." *I'll show you, Dad. I'll show you, Mom.* Right? And so we've got great dysfunction going on that is passed down.

So our story picks up now with Joseph. Seventeen years old, he's the eleventh son of Jacob, or Israel. Benjamin is the youngest. And Joseph is Dad's favorite. And Dad doesn't even try to hide it. He's born to him in his old age, and he's the "one." And he makes him this robe. You've heard of the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and the *Coat of Many Colors*. We don't know exactly, but it was ornate. It was special, and it set him apart. *You're the favorite.* How would you like that? You all have brothers and sisters? Ooh, that would fire me up, right? I'm the middle of three sons. We did some brawling. But we never knew who was the favorite. If that had happened, it could have gone really bad, right? Maybe there was no favorite. I don't know.

But it says Joseph, at 17, is tending flocks with his brothers, and he brings back a bad report about them. I'm dying to know more, but that's all the scripture says. He brings a bad report back about the brothers. So in my mind I'm going, *Is he snitching?* Is his motive really, *I want to get them in trouble?* Or is he really suffering a great injustice and he doesn't know what to do?

The good thing for us, you guys—Matthew 18, Jesus has a real prescription if something is going wrong with you. "Go to your brother," it says, or go to your sister. Go to your friend. And confront them one on one. Try to work it out. Don't tell on them. Try to work it out one on one first. If they don't listen, Jesus tells us, bring somebody else. Bring a witness or two and try to win your brother over. You're not trying to win the argument, you're trying to save the relationship. If he doesn't listen to those people as well, then tell it to the church. So there's a progression in Matthew 18.

They didn't have that, and we don't know the details. But so many problems, church, can be solved if we handle it well the first time. As a pastor, people would come and bring big complaints to me, and I said, "have you talked to the person?" "Well, no, I haven't." "Okay. That would be a good starting place. And if you don't feel safe, I'll go with you."

But I think the question is the motive of the heart. Are you just trying to get them in trouble? Or do you long for their redemption? Do you long for their well being? Search your heart on that one.

So we're not sure on that. But the bad report didn't make the brothers any fonder of Joseph, for sure. And then Joseph starts having these dreams. And it's not in our text, but real quick, he has two dreams. The first is, he saw the sheaves of grain growing up in the field, and his sheaf became much bigger, and all the other sheaves bowed down to it. And what does Joseph do? "Hey brothers, let me tell you about my dream." *Joseph...keep it to yourself.* Right?

And then he has another dream that the sun and the moon and the stars all bowed down to him, and he tells not only his brothers, but he tells Mom and Dad. And Dad can't even believe it. He sees in the dream that he's represented by the sun and the moon, and... "Are we going to bow down to you?" Oh, his brothers wanted to kill him at that point.

So again, we're not told everything here; maybe he's *supposed* to tell them. But sometimes it's good to keep it to yourself. You don't have to share every thought, every revelation that God gives you.

So the jealousy kicked in and the hatred kicked in. I have a story about jealousy, where God taught me a lot. I wonder if you all have a story about being really jealous. Mine was right out of college. I was at a missionary training school called Youth With a Mission, a discipleship training school, and I was set up with a roommate who was just out of high school. So I'm a college graduate, he's a high school graduate. Chad was a nice guy and we were getting along pretty well. He brought his violin and I brought my guitar because I wanted to learn, and I'd been working hard for quite a while. I wasn't getting too far. Chad had never played guitar, but he was a great violin player. And one day he said, "Greg, can I try your guitar?" "Sure, go for it." Well, he just took to it. And he got good. He got good *quick*. And all of a sudden he's playing way beyond my level. And I'm starting to say, *whoa, whoa, wait, wait*. "Greg, can I use your guitar?" (Growls) "Yes." I'm stewing. I don't want him to use my guitar any more. He's getting good.

And then it got worse. The worship director said, "Chad, why don't *you* lead worship today?" With *my guitar*. How dare he, right? Church, I couldn't worship! Why? Because I'm so fixated and jealous of Chad because I wanted to learn guitar and he learned it like *that*, he's a natural...*God, what about me?* But I couldn't even worship because I was so jealous. And God called me out, and God humbled me in some prayer times. And what I felt like God was doing was: Until you can pray, "God, let him be a great worship leader," I'm not going to be free. Because jealousy controls *you* and captures *you*, doesn't it?

So finally I was able to get there, with my whole heart, saying, “God, it’s not about me. It’s not about me. Let Chad be a great worship leader, a great guitar player for Your glory.” And it was sincere, and I was freed, and I could worship.

But jealousy, if it gets hold of you, it will turn to disdain, and it will turn to hatred, and then you’re in trouble. Because it can also turn to murder.

Now church, I need to make something crystal clear. We have a misperception in this culture, and sometimes it filters into the church, that human beings are basically good. We’re good people, and there’s just kind of a few bad apples. Or every once in a while we go astray. But hey, he’s a good guy, or she’s a great gal. Good heart. The scriptures say, “There is none good; no, not one.” The scriptures say that we are sinful, that we are fallen and depraved. You, me, humanity. We are, generally speaking, evil, with the capacity for good. That’s what the scripture says. That’s what all the Reformers believed. John Wesley—read his stuff. He was convinced of it. And that’s because the scriptures teach it so well.

I think what happens is, as a culture we start comparing ourselves to people like Hitler and Charles Manson. *I’ve never killed anybody. No genocides here. I’m pretty good, right?* And next to Hitler and Charles Manson, we all look pretty good. But compare yourself not to them, but put your life up against the life of Jesus, and you might say what Peter did in His presence: “Lord, depart from me, for I am a sinful man.” In the presence of holiness, we start to see our own sin. But He won’t leave you because He loves you, and His plan is to make you holy. To remove your sin by forgiving it and to put His spirit into you, that you might become holy like He is holy. But unless we admit we’re sinners and we’re broken, then it’s not going to happen.

Listen to this. This is important for our times, because we live in a culture that is pointing the finger at each other. *They’re* the bad group. *They’re* the evil group. *That* person’s evil. If you believe *this*, *you’re* of the devil. And people are just throwing these things all around. Alexander Solzhenitsyn said this: “The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained.”

So we’re fallen, but we’re created in God’s image. We have the capacity for good, but evil is right there. And so make no mistake: God’s Word, Jesus Himself, is pretty pessimistic about human nature. But God is incredibly optimistic about His grace breaking into your life and my life and all of humanity and changing us, that we might indeed *be* good. He can change our very nature by conversion. When His life comes

into our life, we are changed and we are made new. But human nature in and of itself, it ain't happening. But God breaking through, it can happen.

So don't deceive yourself. Jesus says, this is the verdict. Light has come into the world, but the men preferred the darkness rather than the light, because their deeds were evil.

So in our story, Joseph is sent another time to "go check on your brothers and bring a report back to me," says his Dad, Jacob. And on his way, they see him. And the jealousy, the disdain, the hatred, has only been nourished and nurtured. And so they say, "Let's kill him. Here comes the dreamer; let's kill him and then see what happens with his dreams." So they plotted and planned and they already had a plan to get themselves off the hook. "We'll take his coat and put blood on it and say, 'Wasn't our fault; wild animal.'" So they were serious. They wanted to kill him.

Now remember, Jacob's brother, the father's brother, had also wanted to kill *him*. There's history repeating itself in these dysfunctional families. And sin can do that in families. Have you not seen it? Where alcohol rips a family and it's the second generation, and you start warning them: "You know what your granddad was like. You don't want to go there. You need to put that away." Right? But it's not just alcohol. It can be infidelity, promiscuity. I've met a number of college students whose parent took their own lives, and they had a great wrestling match thinking that was their destiny, too. That "because my dad committed suicide, that's going to be my destiny." No. That is a lie from the pit of hell. Those things can be broken. Jesus can break through and give new life and purpose. He does not call people to that. But those things grip you, and often you need to break through and you need brothers, sisters, pastors, friends, to come around you and break through that. We've got to be honest about our struggles.

But the progression, mark it: Jealousy to disdain to hatred to murder. And remember, Jesus says, "If you have hatred toward your brother in your heart, you're already guilty of murder." He wants our hearts to be pure.

And so two of the ten brothers are not good with the plan of murder. Reuben, the oldest, is like, "Oh, no. I'm going to have to trick my brothers, and I'm going to get him out of there. But I'm not going to tell them I'm tricking them, because I don't trust them." And then we see Judah isn't up for it, either, and his idea is to sell him to the Ishmaelites.

So have you ever been in that situation? A group of you all get an idea, and maybe you're not good with it, but the whole group's in and they're going for it, and you don't know how to say no? It's kind of like the peer pressure. And I've been in too many of those situations. Fortunately, I've learned, and through God's grace, no great damage was done. But we made bad decisions as a group, and I really didn't want to, but I didn't

have the courage to say, “I’m out.” Reuben did and Judah did. We’ve got to be careful in those situations. We’ve got to train our children, grandchildren: *Be careful of groupthink. Be careful of that herd mentality.*

A woman who attended my church in Suffolk years ago had a son who was a sweet young man. He went off into life and got pulled into an armed robbery. He didn’t want to do it, but his friends talked him into, “Just drive the car. You’re not going to do anything.” Federal prison. He couldn’t say no.

Remember, the first family had the story of murder in their family. And God says to Cain before he killed his brother Abel: “Careful. Sin is crouching at your door and it desires to have you. But you must master it.” God gives us a warning: *Don’t go there. Turn around. Get out of there. Run! Do whatever you have to do, but don’t participate.*

And so here comes Joseph. And they strip him of the robe. Interesting, right? That robe really got them. And they threw him in a cistern, a pit. It’s a place in the desert where they dig it out so water would come in there and they could survive. But the pit, or the cistern, had no water in it at that time.

And then it says these strange words: After they threw him in the pit, having stripped him of his robe, *they sat down for a meal.* I’m troubled by that. You’ve thrown your brother into a pit with the plan of killing him...and you’re hungry, so why not get a bite to eat? Very troubling. But here’s what’s going on. The jealousy and the hatred and the disdain had so filled their hearts, they didn’t care about him. It doesn’t say that Joseph cried out from the pit, but I can’t imagine he didn’t. And so you ignore the cries of your brother? *Dinner’s on. Not worried about him.* How do you eat at a time like that?

Sometimes, church, when we let our hearts go down roads we should never let them go down, they’re calloused and they’re hardened. Paul talks about a seared conscience. And we give a thumbs-up to things that we should never give a thumbs-up to. An apathy creeps in. A hardness of heart creeps in.

Church, the truth is, there’s people in pits around us pretty frequently. And sometimes we’re aware and sometimes we reach out and sometimes we help. But sometimes we don’t want to see. We don’t want to know. We don’t know what to do. Sometimes we’re scared, and so we don’t get involved.

I have found that proximity to suffering takes away the callousness. I did a lot of mission work in Latin America, and one of the most difficult places I’ve been is the dump in Managua, Nicaragua, called La Chureca. People, families, hundreds living in the dump, scavenging it for food every day. And the church ministered to them, provided what they could, but they didn’t have housing for them. And so whole groups of people,

families and kids, scavenging through the waste of Managua, Nicaragua, as a lifestyle, with no real hope to get out of there.

I remember working with some children there and we were trying to just get a soccer game going and be with them while the church leaders were meeting with some of the others that were working in the area. And the kids showed me one of the little boys, and he had this horrific cut on his foot. And they showed it to me and it looked infected. I'm not the doctor type, right? Don't show me blood; I might be the next patient. As I saw this, I said, "He needs to get some help." And they all nodded. I speak Spanish, and it became clear that that's exactly why they brought him to *me*. They had the expectation that *I* would help. And I wasn't prepared for this. But nobody else was available, and we did have some supplies and some water and soap. And I sat down and, with God's grace, cleaned that wound out as best I could and wrapped it up as best I could, made up a bandage and stuff. But I realized, he's got nothing. There's no urgent care down the street that he can run into. Proximity to suffering will take away the calluses of your heart.

One of the greatest things I love about my parents is, in their retirement they've become even more involved. Mom and Dad were involved in a homeless ministry in Wrightsville Beach, Wilmington, North Carolina, for years, called Early Bread. And I was driving with my dad one day. There was a homeless guy coming across the street on his bike, and he's got all his bags on his bike and everything. And my dad leans out the window and says, "Hey Joe! How are you?" And he looks over and says, "Hey Bill! I'm good!" And my dad says, "You going to be there Sunday?" "I'll be there! Thanks, Bill. I'm looking forward to it!" The love of Jesus. My dad's a retired Navy Captain. He could have gone and just lived for himself, lived the good life. Dad and Mom are serving. Into their 80s, they're serving the homeless still. That's the life of Christ. Proximity to suffering will take away those calluses, and you won't just walk by the ones in the pit. You won't just eat your meal while they're suffering.

Church, please don't receive any condemnation here. Sometimes I don't know what to do, and sometimes I avert my eyes. But I try to pray: "God, show me. Don't let me be indifferent to suffering."

William Booth, great Methodist preacher and the founder of the Salvation Army, said this about suffering: "While women weep as they do now, I will fight. While children go hungry as they do now, I will fight. While men go to prison in and out, in and out, as they do now, I will fight. While there is one drunkard left, while there is a poor lost girl upon the streets, while there remains one dark soul without the light of God, I will fight. I will fight to the very end." That's the cry of the Great Commission and the Great Commandment all wrapped up in one. *I will give my life to those in need because He gave His life when I was in need.* Amen? *That's the life we're called to.*

And so the brothers, planning on murdering Joseph. But then Judah says, “Hey, there’s some Ishmaelites coming through, some traders. It’s not going to be real cool if we kill him and his blood is on our hands. Let’s sell him.” *Let’s sell our brother.* It’s sad that that’s an upgrade, but it was, to murder. And so twenty shekels of silver, and their brother is off to Egypt. Certainly a foreshadowing of the thirty shekels of silver that Jesus is traded in for by Judas.

Church, there’s some suffering in the world. This is human trafficking, right? In the scriptures, the 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis. We’re not even through the first book of the Bible and we’ve got human trafficking going on. Let’s cash in on a human being. And it’s alive and well today, church. Virginia Beach is a center. In 2017 the reports came in of 33 active cases of prosecution of human trafficking in Virginia. 33 cases that were being *prosecuted*. Lots more not being prosecuted. 783 active cases in the United States in 2017. And worldwide cases in 2017, just under 25 million.

I’ve heard stories of people crossing the border, often women. “I’ve got a great waitressing job for you.” But it’s not waitressing, and once you’re in a foreign country without a passport, you’re scared, and all of a sudden you’re in a world of evil. There are groups even in the area. Virginia Beach Justice Initiative is a group standing out against human trafficking. A bold Christian group. Church, we can’t be on the sidelines for this. If you’re not aware of it, please be aware of it. If you’ve got grandkids or kids, it should be on your mind. There are evil people out there with evil intentions.

In closing—I hope there’s hope coming through as well as the harsh realities of life. All families have some dysfunction. We are all sinners. We have to turn from jealousy, hatred, and unforgiveness. And we have to make sure our hearts aren’t callused and apathetic to the suffering that goes on in the world. Christ has called us. Christ has forgiven us. Christ has given us new life and purpose and power, and we get to be the ambassadors of this new rule and reign of Jesus on earth. So I urge you, pray with the psalmist. Pray with me that great ancient prayer: **Search me, oh God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my anxious thoughts, and see if there is any offensive or wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way. Amen.**

He loves you. He’s for you. He’s gone ahead and prepared us to do good works. Let’s be about the change. Amen.

## **Closing Prayer**

Church, there’s a fight out there that we need to be a part of. So go get involved in fighting against injustice. Go get involved actively in somebody else’s redemption. Bring them in. Be like William Booth, who says, “While there yet remains one dark soul without

the light of God, I'll fight. I'll fight to the very end." So go as ambassadors for Christ, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Go in peace. Amen.