

09/25/2016 - "The Warp and Weft of God's Work" - Rev. Seth Jones ©

Scripture: *Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21*

Joseph is the link between the covenants God made with Adam and Abraham and the survival of the Hebrew nation that the Lord has promised to Jacob, the father of Israel.

Joseph is the beloved of his father, Israel/Jacob, and he is hated by his brothers, the Patriarchs of Israel. They hate Joseph so much, they want to kill him, but the eldest, Reuben, stops them and simply has Joseph thrown in a pit. While Reuben is gone, the other brothers sell Joseph into slavery. Reuben devises a ruse for their father so the brothers appear innocent by dipping Joseph's special coat in goat's blood and pass their brother off as having been devoured by animals.

Joseph then journeys from slavery to prison to dream interpreter for Pharaoh to what is essentially the vice-Pharaoh for all of Egypt. When famine strikes the land, Joseph's brothers come to Egypt looking for help. Joseph recognizes them, but they do not recognize their long-lost brother. At the end of the story, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers in an emotional reunion of forgiveness.

Today's reading makes me think of two types of people. The first type of person is someone you want to despise, but simply can't; the other type is someone you know you should love, but can't. I have a friend from seminary who is like the first type - someone I want to despise, but can't.

This guy. He is beautiful physically. He graduated from high school as valedictorian and graduated from college with honors. He lettered in sports. He learned Greek and Hebrew with ease while in seminary. The more I got to know him over time, the more I thought, this is exactly the kind of guy I couldn't stand in high school. But no matter what I learned about this man, no matter what he did, I thought he was great. Everyone loves him. Everything he does succeeds. He graduated from seminary, again with honors, and instead of going into ministry, he opened a brewery. It is one of the most successful microbreweries in the NorthEast. Just a couple years ago, he won a bodybuilding championship, along with his beautiful bodybuilding wife. I want to dislike this guy, but I can't.

The other type of person is like Joseph. You know you should love him because of family relationships, or people who he associates with, or just human decency. But no matter how hard you try, you cannot like him, much less love him. Sometimes, you see his success - maybe he is the teacher's pet, or maybe your mom loves him more than you, or he stole your girlfriend - and you actually hate him. Joseph is this type of person. He is arrogant; he lords it over his brothers; he gets away with all kinds of things anyone else would get in trouble for even though you did nothing wrong. And the brothers hate Joseph for it.

Even with all that goes wrong for Joseph, Joseph maintains a higher view of things and seems to be carried by some external force that leads to greater success even after great falls from grace. It becomes pretty clear when we read Joseph's entire story, that, even though he is an arrogant jerk, God intends something great for Joseph. Genesis 50:20, on page 48, puts it this way when Joseph is reunited with his brothers:

*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.*

This is a theme that comes up in Scripture in many ways. Paul says something similar in the book of Romans, in chapter 8, verse 28, on page 158. Remember, the Book of Romans is Paul's attempt to weave the followers of Christ into the promises God has made with Abraham and Jacob and Moses and the Prophets. In Romans 8, Paul says,

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.*

Both these verses, Genesis 50 and Romans 8, have been read to mean that God creates suffering so that good things can happen. I believe this to be a great misunderstanding. God does not **cause** suffering; God **redeems** suffering that is happening to or because of us. God always intends a greater thing for us than whatever we are going through at the time, and God will work through us in order that such a greater thing will come to pass. This is why Jesus tells the disciples in the Gospel of John, in chapter 14, on page 109,

*Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*

God works through us to create the greater things Christ also did in the world. Or, think of it this way - Jesus is one person doing great things for God in the world. How much more can happen when many are allowing the greater works of God to work through them in Christ's name?

The Hebrew language can help us in understanding how this happens. In our verse back in Genesis 50:20, the word for "intended" in Hebrew is "chashab". The literal translation for *chashab* is "to weave", but it is almost always translated into its figurative meaning, which is "to intend" or "to manipulate" or "to mean to do something". But listen to what happens to our understanding if we use the literal word in Genesis 50:20:

*Even though you **wove** harm and evil for me, God **wove** it for good...*

God weaves redemption and hope out of the evil and harm we might do to one another or ourselves.

My mom has done needlework and embroidery her whole life. She is very creative and artistic in her work. It is a meticulous, careful, and colorful activity. One of the things she used to do with her talent was volunteer at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts. The Institute had a large collection of medieval tapestries and my mom would go over several times a month to help in the restoration of the tapestries. The interesting thing about tapestries is that, in the restoration process, she would uncover previous work that was done on the tapestry. Restoration of tapestries, unlike restoring say a Da Vinci painting, is a participation in the work of other women going down through centuries and centuries. Throughout the ages, women have rescued, restored, repaired, renewed these tapestries, participating in an artwork through time and generations.

Sometimes restoring a tapestry meant it was recovered and rescued from the destruction of time. Then, the work is to make sure an ancient piece of weaving and needlework was restored to something like its original state. But sometimes, the tapestry had simply been passed down from one place to another, having been repaired along the way. Maybe it has some wear that has to be re sewn, or perhaps moths have gotten to part of it, or a poorly woven and embroidered section would have to be pulled and redone in the same style as the rest of the tapestry. And sometimes, the restoration was to make the old new again. Sometimes, way down at the base of the tapestry, the warp and the weft of the foundation would have to be rewoven in order to re-create what had been embroidered on that foundation. The goal was always to make an old great piece of participatory artwork into a greater, stronger, newer piece of participatory artwork. Recovery, rescue, repair, and restoration was, and still is, the art of caring for tapestries.

God weaves the wrongs done to Joseph into a greater tapestry, one that serves and saves multitudes of people through time. We are empowered by God and Christ to let God weave those greater things into our lives and relationships. After a time, we begin to learn a little bit more how God guides the shuttles to form the warp and weft of our foundation. Then we can bear witness to the greater things to which Jesus calls his disciples, his followers. And then we begin to become participants in the rescue, recovery, repair, renewal, and restoration of relationships and lives. There is some great wisdom in Joseph's story, and we see that wisdom when Joseph chooses the greater thing in his reunion with his brothers. He chooses forgiveness, inclusion, love.

Proverbs 3, on page 586, beginning at verse 27, says,

*Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due,  
when it is in your power to do it.  
Do not say to your neighbour, 'Go, and come again;  
tomorrow I will give it'—when you have it with you.  
Do not plan harm against your neighbour  
who lives trustingly beside you.  
Do not quarrel with anyone without cause,  
when no harm has been done to you.  
Do not envy the violent  
and do not choose any of their ways*

When it is in our power to do good, do not withhold it, Proverbs says. Choose to participate in the greater works of the Lord by finding out how God is weaving good into what seems like a terrible situation. To do this work requires focusing on the greater works and goals, the ones God presses us toward, than the feelings that are consuming us in the moment, or what we think might best serve ourselves in the situation. This is what Joseph does, isn't it? He focuses on the greater things Jesus speaks of in the Gospel of John - on forgiveness, inclusion, and love. Even more, that forgiveness, inclusion and love is not dependent on the past actions and the present

manipulation of the brothers. God pushes us to a higher consideration than a dysfunctional family history.

God weaves these relationships into an outcome that saves Egypt and Joseph's brothers, which allows for the people of Israel to survive into the future, which allows God's promises to continue into the future. We participate in that great weaving of forgiveness, that great tapestry of love and inclusion which has been rescued, renewed, and restored when we act toward the greater works, when we reach for what is greater than us in our relationships. This happens over generations, over long periods of time, of God's people continually building on the warp and weft God has created as our foundation. Let God weave us into that greater way, with Jesus and his disciples as our examples. The warp and weft are strong there, and will hold us into a greater outcome than what may be overcoming us right now. As Ecclesiastes 4 says, on page 617:

*And though one might prevail against another, two will withstand one. A threefold cord is not quickly broken.*

*Amen.*