

## **Joseph and His Brothers – Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 – August 13, 2017**

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When I was contemplating this particular story earlier in the week, I had some initial thoughts on what I wanted to say this morning. But then yesterday afternoon, after reading some troubling posts by friends on Facebook, I turned on CNN and learned of the tragic events going on in Charlottesville, Virginia. I watched video footage that showed a rally of white supremacists, white nationalists, and Nazi groups turn violent. The groups had gathered in this Charlottesville to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee and other relics of the city's Confederate past. Violence broke out between the right-wing groups and counter-protestors. The governor of Virginia declared a state of emergency as the violence escalated. Yesterday afternoon, a young man drove his car into a group of counter-protestors, killing a 32-year-old woman and injuring 19 others. Later, a police helicopter crashed, killing two officers who had been assisting with public safety efforts. <http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/12/us/charlottesville-helicopter-crash/index.html>

As the hours passed yesterday, I watched video of the events, listened to politicians and journalists condemn the hatred and violence of the alt-right groups, heard the governor of Virginia tell the extremists to "Go home. You are not wanted in this great commonwealth," watched images of counter-protestors, including members of the clergy, linking arms and praying. A pastor friend of mine was there, volunteering in a local hospital. I noted that many people, on both sides of the political divide, call this event an act of domestic terrorism.

But I was struck, when I looked at photos of the people who had gathered for this Unite the Right rally, by the people in them. Certainly, there were plenty of those who displayed their hatred outright, waving Confederate flags and flashing their swastika tattoos, dressed in white robes or t-shirts bearing messages and symbols of hatred. But there were others. Young people, mostly men, white-skinned, clean-cut, dressed in khakis and polo shirts, toting citronella tiki torches, the ones that you might find at your cousin's backyard BBQ, purchased for \$6.99 at the Wal-mart – guys you might see at a baseball game with their young kids or jetting around the lake in a speed boat. But these guys were chanting words of hate and anger. Words and threats directed toward people who didn't look like them.

Joseph was 17 years old, the second youngest son of his father Jacob and firstborn son of his mother Rachel. He was loved to the point of favoritism by his father. This preference that his father showed to him was especially evident in a culture that awards all the best perks to the oldest son. This favoritism was exhibited by Joseph through a specially made coat given to him by his father. His older brothers despised him.

Additionally, Joseph was a dreamer, like his father. He shared his dreams with his family, and in them, he held positions of power over them. As you can imagine, this inflamed the brothers even more. They saw him flaunting his favored status and imagining himself to hold a station far beyond the expectations of their society. He considered himself to be better than his family, they thought. He refused to submit to his place in the family, that of a lowly, worthless younger brother. And his boldness disgusted them.

One day, Joseph's father sent him to find his brothers and check on them. He was known for bringing scathing reports back to his father of his brothers' flaws. When the brothers spotted him, they plotted his death, saying, "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits...and we shall see what will become of his dreams." Remember, that's their brother they're talking about here.

At least one of the brothers was thinking clearly, Reuben, the oldest, kept them from killing him, suggesting instead that they should just toss him down into the pit. His thought was to save him later, when tempers had cooled down or when their attention was elsewhere. He would rescue his brother and take him back to their father. But that didn't work out the way he had planned.

While Reuben was away, the other brothers continued to plot. While their younger brother was in the bottom of a pit, without food and water, the others enjoyed a meal together. They noticed a caravan coming their way, and Judah suggested that they may as well earn a bit of money in the process and sell their brother into slavery. For 20 pieces of silver, they sold their brother.

Reuben came back, discovered Joseph was gone, and worried about what to do. The brothers, after slaughtering a goat, spread the blood on Joseph's special coat, and returned it to their father, saying that he must have been killed by a wild animal. The deceitful brothers comforted their father as believed their lie.

Well, if you know the rest of the story of Joseph, you know that eventually his ability to interpret dreams brought him into special favor with the Pharaoh, and Joseph became a powerful man. And eventually he became the savior of his family by giving them grain when the land of Canaan was faced with a horrible and lengthy draught. And the story had a happy ending. Joseph reconciled with his brothers, who repented of their evil against him. I was going to talk about how even in the darkest of circumstances, when hope seems lost and evil has won the day, God can bring about positive results. It may take time, but our hope in what God can do can give us courage and hope in the face of the vilest situations that might arise.

But in light of the tragic events in Charlottesville yesterday, I don't want to jump to the happy ending. I want to stand in that pasture with the sons of Jacob as they allowed their hatred to rule their minds, as they plotted the vilest evil against their younger brother, as they conspired to kill him.

His crimes? His father favored him above the other brothers. Not only did their father love him more, this favoritism allowed Joseph to hold a position that was above his social station. In their reckoning, as the second to youngest brother, he was nothing. He had ten brothers older than him who deserved more. They were entitled to more. And no little snot-nosed youngster could take what rightfully belonged to them.

Additionally, not only did Jacob honor him with a fancy coat and more attention than he deserved., the boy himself dared to dream of a situation where he would be in the position of power. And he boasted about it! How dare he even dream of being above those who held

greater power! How dare he envision any situation where he might hold power over his betters. He was nothing in their eyes and in the eyes of society. He should accept that without reservation.

The brothers seethed in their anger, and their jealousy, and their hatred. He didn't deserve to live.

Reuben, the oldest brother, stepped in. He reasoned with them. Why get blood on your hands? Let's toss him into a pit without food and water and let nature take its course. He appeared to go along with them conspiracy, but in his heart, he knew they were wrong. He planned to save Joseph, but he planned to do it secretly, later on, when the coast was clear. They can't know his truth thoughts. It was better to live under the façade of hatred, lest his brothers think badly of him. He didn't want to give up any of his status in their eyes.

Reuben knew they were wrong, yet he remained silent. His hesitation and unwillingness to take a stand for what was right resulted in years of slavery for his brother. He still had his position as oldest brother. He had the most power. Yet he failed to use it. He blew it.

Yesterday's events prove to us that racism and hatred are alive and well in the United States. There is no room for terrorism in the kingdom of God. People of color, immigrants, LGBT folks, women, and all those groups who are on the receiving end of hatred, fear, and oppression each of dreams of sharing in the basic human rights of all people and having an equal spot at the table. But there are those who would rather keep them "in their place." The bigots and the extremists believe that if they kill the dreamers, they can kill the dream. Will those of us who hold positions of power, power that has been given to us by how we conform to the expectations of society, will we refuse to speak up on behalf of those who have no voice? Will we stand aside, while our brothers and sisters are brutalized?