

## **“Family”**

First Congregational United Church of Christ, Gaylord, Michigan

Sunday, August 16, 2026

Texts: Psalm 133 and Genesis 45: 1-15

Our story from Genesis really begins in Genesis 37. Imagine yourselves as one of the brothers in the story given here. Remember, this Joseph is not the same Joseph as the one in the New Testament who is Jesus’ adoptive father. This comes way before that narrative.

Here’s the Genesis 37 narrative:

Jacob lived in the land of Canaan where his father was an immigrant. <sup>2</sup>This is the account of Jacob’s descendants. Joseph was 17 years old and tended the flock with his brothers. While he was helping the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father’s wives, Joseph told their father unflattering things about them. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons because he was born when Jacob was old. Jacob had made for him a long<sup>[a]</sup> robe. <sup>4</sup>When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of his brothers, they hated him and couldn’t even talk nicely to him.

<sup>5</sup>Joseph had a dream and told it to his brothers, which made them hate him even more. <sup>6</sup>He said to them, “Listen to this dream I had. <sup>7</sup>When we were binding stalks of grain in the field, my stalk got up and stood upright, while your stalks gathered around it and bowed down to my stalk.”

<sup>8</sup>His brothers said to him, “Will you really be our king and rule over us?” So they hated him even more because of the dreams he told them.

<sup>9</sup>Then Joseph had another dream and described it to his brothers: “I’ve just dreamed again, and this time the sun and the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me.”

<sup>10</sup>When he described it to his father and brothers, his father scolded him and said to him, “What kind of dreams have you dreamed? Am I and your mother and your brothers supposed to come and bow down to the ground in front of you?” <sup>11</sup>His brothers were jealous of him, but his father took careful note of the matter.

I don’t think I have to explain to you what came next. Later in the chapter the brothers decide that even though they would like to kill him, they instead throw him in an empty cistern, and then they end up selling him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. Then, they tear up the robe and dip it in some blood so they can tell their father that

his favorite son has passed. Sounds like a great family, doesn't it? And yet, I'm sure if we think about it, we have some issues in our families as well. This story isn't necessarily a historically accurate story, but it does speak of family relations. I hope your family relations are all wonderful, and I pray that you have never considered killing a loved one, or leaving them in a dry cistern, or selling them into slavery. At the same time, there are the realities of jealousy, anger, frustration, estrangement, and other such issues in most every family.

Further, if you believe that our family is much larger than the family of our birth or adoption (from the Kids' Chat), then you know that the human family has all of these issues and more. People do kill other people over some of the same issues. There is a more critical issue here, though, and that is where is God in all of this? The book of Genesis is clear that God is at work behind the scenes. God isn't preventing the situation that got Joseph in this mess, nor is God controlling every activity of the humans involved. Instead, God is working out something more, something unexpected, and perhaps is something we can learn from and apply to our own family systems, large and small.

Whenever I speak of the book of Genesis, you can rest assured that I have consulted with the late Walter Brueggemann (*Interpretation Bible Series: Genesis*, pages 343ff). He begins the discussion of Genesis 45 this way: "Those who have entered into the pathos of this family, a family driven by a dream to conflict and fear, are now prepared for the turn. In a single artistic moment, the entire plot is made visible. In this scene, the plot is larger than every player, including Joseph."

Look at what this dream has done to this family. We can all agree that having dreams is a good thing, but sometimes when and how we share our dreams can have terrible effects. The family in this Genesis story are governed by the dream and chafes against it. “The family, like many others, would manage better without a dream to disturb and disrupt the normal ‘proper ordering.’”

The dream was disturbing to the family, and maybe it is to us as well. Maybe we are tied to the “proper ordering” of things. We cannot deal with someone or something that disrupts what we believe to be proper. Make no mistake, Joseph was clearly arrogant and maybe even a jerk to his brothers. At the same time, what did their jealousy and need for revenge do to them? How many of their own dreams were missed altogether, or cast aside because of the all-consuming rage against Joseph? How many of our dreams are missed altogether, or cast aside, because of all-consuming rage aimed at a family member? Have we wasted time like the brothers seem to have wasted theirs?

Joseph, meanwhile, made the best of things. We didn’t read the whole of the story, so I’ll leave that to you, but eventually Joseph made it into the house of Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt. He became a trusted advisor, and he continued to trust his visions that provided for not only Egypt, but eventually for his own family and kin back in Israel. “The family issues tilt toward political realities.” Here is where we re-enter our story from Chapter 45.

In this story, the “dead-one-now-alive discloses his identity.” He tells his brothers, “I am Joseph.” You can imagine their reaction. It’s remarkably similar to the one the disciples had after Jesus was resurrected from the dead. I don’t know if you have ever betrayed

someone, but if you have, you might have some idea what brothers felt when confronted by the one they sold into slavery. They certainly were afraid and had every reason to be. Contrary to what they expected, Joseph does not “exploit and act out the past.” In other words, he has moved beyond and broken with the hurt of his past. Instead, “he invites his brothers to put that pitiful past behind them...The new possibility does not come from anything done by the brothers. It is, rather, a gift wrapped in the speech [of Joseph].”

Lest you get confused, I’m not advocating here what you should do when you are wronged. I’m not telling you that you need to mimic Joseph if you have been betrayed. It’s too simplistic a way to talk about betrayal and our reactions to it. I do think, though, that there is still learning here about how pent-up resentment, hurt and anger can do more harm than betrayal itself. At the very least, it can make the original betrayal far more destructive. But like I said, everyone reacts to betrayal differently, and it’s too complex for simple answers.

Instead, I’d invite you to see yourself as the betrayer. It hurts to admit it, but I have betrayed people—sometimes lacking awareness no less hurtful than Joseph’s lack of awareness in this story. I don’t know the specifics, but I’m quite sure that I have betrayed people, even without intending to do so. It doesn’t take a lot to put myself in the place of the brothers, deserving retribution for the hurt I have caused. The fear of the possibility of facing someone I betrayed can be fearful. The brothers had to tremble with fear. Maybe famine was a better choice than to face Joseph.

Joseph chose instead of retribution to instead tell his brothers, “Do not fear,” followed by an announcement of graciousness. Sounds like someone else we know when he faced the disciples post-resurrection. The same words, “Do not fear” were shared by Jesus when retribution would have been the obvious choice. At the same time, make no mistake that this narrative does not include anything specific related to forgiveness or reconciliation. “The narrative is too terse for that.” Joseph instead chooses to be concerned for his father and that the father would know Joseph was still alive. He also wanted to care for his brothers for their time of deepest need. “The guilty fear of the brothers is superseded. The grief of the father is resolved.”

What, then, are we to learn from all of this? I could talk for hours about this story and this family. There’s a lot here. Same is true in your life and in mine. Things have not always gone smoothly in our families, the ones of our birth, and the larger human family. It would be beautiful and wonderful if we never betrayed one another. It would be beautiful and wonderful if we were never arrogant or treated our fellow humans poorly in any way. Experience tells me that this is nearly impossible. I can aim for those goals, but somehow in some way, I will cause hurt. I pray it is never to the level that Joseph and his brothers caused one another. I pray the same for you as well. I also know that I have been betrayed sometimes by those I believed loved me most. The truth is that harboring those feelings of resentment have caused me as much or more harm than the original betrayal. I have a choice about what I do with my past. Learn from it. Grow from it. Deal with it. Perhaps I will arrive at forgiveness and reconciliation but remember that was not part of this story. Joseph recognized that he had agency, and he could decide what he would and would not do.

We don't know why he did what he did. The narrative and the commentators agree that God was behind Joseph's actions, and the way that Joseph's life evolved. That is true for me as well. Some of the deepest betrayals in my life, once dealt with, have led to some of the greatest growth experiences I've ever experienced. Looking back, I can see the hand of God at work in my life, even though some of it has been horrible. I've made bad choices and others have made bad choices related to me. At the same time, here I am doing what I do, and I can celebrate where my life has been and where it is going. Not all the time, not every day, not in every instance, but I can see it. And I can choose to break from the past like Joseph did. Perhaps holding resentment doesn't do me any good. Most of those involved in the betrayals of my life have passed away or certainly have forgotten or never knew what they did. Letting go of resentment doesn't mean the event never happened, or that it is to be ignored. Instead, letting go of resentment allows me to choose a different path forward. It may not work for you, but for me, letting go opens me up in ways that harboring resentment closes me in.

In short, I believe what Joseph did, while it benefited his brothers, was more about Joseph than about them. I didn't expect this sermon to end this way, but here we are. I've told you many times what Richard Rohr taught me, "Pain that is not transformed is transmitted." How we transform our pain is between us, God and whomever else we choose to include. But if it's not transformed, then we are bound to share it with others. Our betrayal of others may at times be based on our own betrayal. Maybe it wasn't intentional, but that is the outcome. We can make other choices. We can dream dreams. We can release ourselves from being tethered to those hurts and betrayals.

Family. Some say it puts the fun in dysfunctional – whether it be our family of origin or our human family. Maybe it is. But maybe it is because we feel we don't have a choice in the matter. We often cannot control what happens to us, but we can choose our response. Even if it takes us years. Remember, Joseph hadn't seen his brothers in a very long time. It seems that what he did with that time was good for him, maybe even better than it might have been. What you do with your hurts is up to you, and no, I don't understand all of the complexity of your lives. I offer this message this morning for your consideration. Maybe your choices today are what is best for you today. Maybe they are the best choices ever. Maybe there is a choice that frees you to be all that God ever intended for you. God is at work in you and is more than willing to do whatever it takes to set you free from whatever has you bound.

Only you—in consultation with God—can really ever know what is best for you. May you and I trust God in all of our lives, especially in the places that hurt most.

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.