

**Sins of Our Fathers and Mothers
Genesis 37:1-36**

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Fourth Presbyterian Church**

Today we are continuing our sermon series on the Book of Genesis by transitioning from the story of Jacob to the story of his sons, especially his favorite son Joseph.

We left off last week with the reconciliation of Jacob and Esau. You may remember how Jacob tricks Esau out of his birthright and his patrilineal blessing. Esau is so enraged at these deceits that he openly seeks to kill his brother, which prompts Jacob to flee to their mother's homeland to let his brother cool off. Along the way he has remarkable encounters at Bethel and the Jabbok River, and his family and possessions grow significantly. Ultimately, the story of Jacob and Esau ends as a happy one. After years of estrangement, when Jacob and Esau embrace each other as brothers, rather than fight as enemies, it is a story of love and forgiveness triumphing over hatred and pain.

The story continues with the next generation of patriarchs, the sons of Jacob, the namesake progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel. Listen now to this amazing story as it begins in Genesis 37.



As biblical stories go, it doesn't get much better than this, and it only gets better from here. This is one of my favorite biblical stories. You can see why the story of Joseph has always been very popular. It is full of family drama, intrigue, pathos. You can see how it inspired Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice to write the immensely entertaining musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*.

What we have heard today sets up an incredible story of ups and downs, twists and turns, that culminates as a fascinating reflection on the notions of free will and divine providence. But for now, we have a story of brothers in conflict.

Sounds familiar, doesn't it? For me, the most striking aspect of the introduction to the story of Joseph and his brothers is the sense that the trajectory of this family has not really progressed very much. Despite the brave reconciliation of Esau and Jacob, Jacob's sons seem locked in the same cycle of violence that threatened him during his entire life. Is this a case of reaping what one sows? An instance of those living by the sword dying by the sword?

There is an interesting biblical debate about whether or not the sins of parents are punished in the lives of their children. In various foundational statements about the nature of God and God's relationship with humanity, the Torah bears witness to the ancient notion that children pay in their lifetime for the sins of their parents. For example, in Exodus 34:6-7 we read:

The LORD! The LORD!
a God who is compassionate and merciful,
very patient,
full of great loyalty and faithfulness,
showing great loyalty
to a thousand generations,
forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
punishing for their parents' sins
their children and their grandchildren,
as well as the third and the fourth generation.

By the time of the Babylonian exile, a saying had become popular among the people of Israel: "When parents eat unripe grapes, the children's teeth suffer." Yet through the prophets

Ezekiel and Jeremiah, God seems to challenge and reverse this ancient understanding.¹ No longer are people held accountable for the actions of their parents; rather, it is only for our own actions that we are held accountable. The fate of each individual is determined by his or her own actions, not the actions of one's parents.

Read within the context of this biblical debate—which, like most biblical debates, remains unresolved in the fullness of our biblical canon—the transition from the conflict of Jacob and Esau to the conflict of Joseph and his brothers seems like an argument in favor of the idea that sons and daughters do indeed pay for the sins of fathers and mothers.

We might provide a more nuanced explanation than the black-and-white theology of Exodus, but it seems that this notion of generational patterns of sin, conflict, and violence rings true in our own experience. We often talk about cycles of poverty and violence that seem to entrap children in the same lifestyles, perspectives, and actions of their parents.

Throughout my summer of church travel, I have seen this play out over and over. In Israel and Palestine, generations have been born since the conflicts of the mid-20th century, generations who have known *nothing but* division and conflict. In Northern Ireland, from where I have most recently returned, children are born into a society that enculturates them with the prejudices and hatreds of their parents. And the same is true, I think, of many places in the United States. Racism and homophobia both seem to be problems that get transmitted from generation to generation.

Is there no way out? Is one generation destined to follow in the footsteps of previous generations? Are Joseph and his brothers destined to follow in the footsteps of Jacob and Esau?

¹ Ezekiel 18:1-32 and Jeremiah 31:27-30.

On the one hand, there seems to be an equally prevalent sense that the solution to intractable social conflict is the passing of time and the movement from one generation to the next. For example, our struggles with racism and homophobia seem to be getting better—though clearly not fully resolved—as younger generations assume leadership roles. I grew up with racism inherited from the cultural DNA of my parents' generation. From time to time, despite my best intentions to see past the divisions of race, the latent racism of previous generations rears its ugly head. My greatest hope is that my own son, who was born in Hyde Park and rides South Side buses with me in which we are often the only two Euro-American passengers, will grow up blind to the racial divisions that were definitive for generations of his ancestors.

Yet it is the lingering presence of division and fear that helps us realize that time alone will not resolve our conflicts and erase our prejudices. Lasting peace and reconciliation in cultures of division and conflict will only come about as the result of intentional action to change the trajectory of generational cycles.

This summer I have spent time in both Israel/Palestine and Northern Ireland, two places scarred by decades of bloody conflict. In both places, I witnessed brave individuals and organizations committed to the project of overcoming these historic divisions and paving the way for a new and better future. These peacemakers and reconcilers made conscious decisions to resist the cultural DNA inherited from their parents and forge a different path for their own children. These decisions are never easy. The work involved is difficult and often not very popular. But I believe this is what God calls us to do as people of a new and emerging kingdom,

a new and emerging way of being community, a new and emerging way of living together as sisters and brothers.

Last night I attended a screening of a powerful new documentary that is [currently playing at the Gene Siskel Film Center](#). [The Interruptors](#) chronicles a year in the work of [CeaseFire](#), an organization here in Chicago committed to stopping the violence that is ripping apart large portions of our city. This film is *the* best two hour presentation you can see of the reality of Chicago's culture of violence and the people who are affected by it. You must go see this film, and bring others with you. You will hear the real stories of people living in neighborhoods of poverty and violence. You will hear the stories of people who have escaped these cycles of violence and are now working with CeaseFire to be a part of the solution.

One of the violence interrupters, Tio, speaks of how violence is a *learned* behavior that can be *unlearned* and changed. Proof of this is seen in the lives of several former gang members and felons who have turned things around and now actively work to prevent violence and help others escape these patterns of self-destructive behavior. So many of these heroes talk about how the absence of parents, or the influence of parents who themselves were involved in crime and violence, shaped and set up their early failures. Yet they refuse to let themselves be bound by their sins *or* the sins of their parents. They found the strength to save themselves *from* themselves, and they are offering opportunities for others to follow in their journeys of redemption and transformation.

This is not a religious film, but that sure sounds like good news to me.

At this point in our biblical story, Joseph and his brothers are not there yet. They are still enmeshed in the traditions of conflict and violence inherited from their parents and

grandparents. Yet there is hope for these brothers, just as there is hope for us, hope for Israel and Palestine, hope for Northern Ireland. We cannot help being shaped by the failings of previous generations, but we are given the opportunity to choose different paths for ourselves and for our children.

Let us journey together with Joseph and his brothers toward a future that is not bound by the past. Let us journey together toward lasting peace and true reconciliation. Let us journey together toward the good news of God's kingdom emerging all around us.

Amen.