



People Like Us

Frenemies: Joseph and His Brothers

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

June 19, 2022

I wonder if you have noticed all the new *verbs* that have entered our shared lexicon in recent decades. Not too long ago, the phrase “I’ll just Google it” would have been met with blank stares of confusion, but now we all know what that sentence means. In college, when I joined the social media world, I learned that the word “friend” can be a verb, as in “have you friended me yet?” And now we have dialoguing, adulating, and podding. Of course, the most well-known of all is “text.” Once a sturdy, stationary, static noun referring to written material preserved in physical form, “text” is now much more commonly used as a verb than a noun. Last week, I told our son Ben that we needed to call his cousin to wish her a happy 8th birthday. Ben’s reply was, “Dad, can you just text her?” For better or worse, it seems as if almost any noun can be *verbed*.

Rapid shifts in technology and culture have even led to the creation of whole new words, which often merge two distinct or even opposite concepts. Examples include infotainment, webinar, and netiquette. My personal favorite I just learned in the last week is “nonversation,” which refers to a conversation without any value. A “nonversation,” which is often what happens in the comments section following a Facebook post or article. The worlds of social media, contemporary culture, and complex human relationships have also combined to give the intriguing new word that I’ve included in my sermon title this morning: Frenemy. Though the word seems to have appeared in a column way back in 1953, the chances are that most of us only heard it in the last decade or so. It was then that “frenemy” made it big, with its first entry in Webster’s dictionary. If you are still wondering what in the world the word means, here’s that definition: “one who pretends to

be a friend but is actually an enemy.”ⁱ Or, the debut entry in the Oxford English Dictionary, which is similar: “a person with whom one is friendly despite a fundamental dislike.”ⁱⁱ

Now, I’m not sure what the ancient Hebrew word for frenemy would be, but I do believe that this morning’s narrative from Genesis illustrates that definition quite perfectly. Joseph and his eleven brothers—frenemies. The convoluted and complicated interactions between them contain all of the distinguishing marks of human relationships. In this brief story, we find parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, jealousy, selfishness, pride, deviousness, and even hatred that leads to acts of violence. Upset by their father’s favoring of Joseph and their brother’s ready acceptance of the attention and affection (even showing off his gift), the eleven conspire against their brother, first planning to kill him and finally settling on a hefty sum paid by traders passing through Canaan on their way to Egypt. In this way, they spare the life of their friend, their enemy, their brother, while also ridding themselves of him for good. Or so they think.

To be fair, two play at this game, and Joseph fills the role of frenemy as well as his brothers. In the verses that we omitted this morning, Joseph proudly recounts to the other eleven a pair of dreams he had in which his brothers symbolically bow down to him. He loved telling his brothers about those dreams. Not exactly a method for endearing yourself to your siblings, but a perfect way to make frenemies. That act sets the stage for our reading this morning. Jacob (father Jacob) sends Joseph (favored son) out to the fields where his brothers are, and when they see this “dreamer” coming they resolve to make sure those dreams will never become a reality.

Like much of the Book of Genesis, this story of Joseph and his brothers uses one family, one family narrative, to tell the whole human story. Perhaps you remember the powerful opening line of Tolstoy's novel *Anna Karenina*: "Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way."ⁱⁱⁱ And so it is with this one family, representing all families, whose narrative fills the pages of the Bible's first book. And I think we can take some comfort in this choice. Despite the filtered pictures and carefully curated posts that fill our social media feeds today, we know the truth. The truth is that families are messy. Every family. The truth is that families are complicated. Every family. The truth is that relationships aren't ever easy and are often painful. The truth is that the closer we are to people the more likely they are to disappoint us.

It might help us to see that the same is true of this family, given God's favor and the call to bless all the world in the Book of Genesis. In the words of my friend David Lewicki, "Jacob (father Jacob), who never felt his own father Isaac's genuine love. Jacob, who instead steals his father's fortune and blessing from the hands of his own brother. Jacob, who had to run for his life from his elder brother. Joseph, whose brothers are born into a family where love is never evenly apportioned, where every day's dawn brings new expressions of resentment between parents. These brothers, they grow up in a home where the warmth of parental approval is rare and the chill of disdain breeds bitterness." And then there is Joseph. "Joseph is a little brother who is loved too much, who gets away with too much, spoiled, a tattletale, a son who acts like the sun; a child with greatness inside, who never knows if his greatness comes from a blessed nature or an unhealthy nurture."

We know this truth by experience and intuition. Human beings tend to make a mess of everything, including the relationships that were designed to sustain and nourish us. How often we find ourselves regretting harsh words spoken to those we love. How often we find ourselves in adversarial relationships with those to whom we feel the closest, the deepest

feelings. How many opportunities for connection and reconciliation we forfeit by choosing to be frenemies rather than siblings. In his *Screwtape Letters*, C.S. Lewis gives these words to elder demon Screwtape, writing to his young nephew. He writes, "Hatred is often the compensation by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate."^{iv} *The more he fears, the more he will hate.*

It may have occurred to you this morning, hearing our scripture text, that there is a notable character absent from the story: God. The God whose voice and presence have been ubiquitous in the stories of Joseph's ancestors, from the call of Abraham, through the stories of Isaac and Jacob. God's name does not appear. God's voice is not raised in this story. Why is the presence of God absent from this troubling and all-too-true story of very real human interactions? How can there be no divine intervention on Joseph's behalf? Where is God in this story? Or your story? Perhaps you have asked that question in your own life, as you navigate the choppy waters of relationships with other human beings, as you make friends and enemies and, yes, frenemies. Maybe you've lamented the absence of God in a particularly painful family situation. Maybe you feel that way today, when many are joyfully celebrating the gift of fathers while you grieve loss or experience the trauma that comes with difficult memories. Maybe today, or someday, or every day, you ask, "Where is God?"

In the story of Joseph and his brothers, and in our own stories, we may have to read between the lines if we are to find God. Remember the dreams of brothers bowing down? They are not the final dreams that Joseph will have. Dreams will be a constant in his life, one of those pre-technological communication methods. Though hidden, silent, and invisible, the dream is the unsettling work of God upon which this story depends. Without the dream always there in subtle and implicit ways, there would be no Joseph. There would be no story. From the perspective of the brothers, without the dream

there would be no conflict, no trouble. For the father, without the dream there would be no grief or loss. One scholar writes, “The dream sets its own course ... And in the end, the dream prevails over the tensions of the family.”^v

Like Joseph and Jacob and these eleven hurting brothers, we may not see from day to day the slow, silent work of God in our lives. Growing seeds do not make much noise. And yet, from this we must not assume that God is absent. I remember my mentor’s words at a time of doubt and fear. She said, “Chris, you cannot prove the promise of God in advance, but if you live them, they’ll turn out true every time.”

So it is that through the brothers’ deceitful, mean-spirited, hateful action, Joseph finds himself in Egypt. And the dream lives on, and time goes by. And many years later, as second in command to Pharaoh himself, Joseph’s dreams save the lives of his family during a devastating famine.

The story of Joseph ends the way it began, with the interaction of Joseph and these eleven brothers. Their father Jacob has died and the twelve come together to bury him in his homeland. Fearing the worst, these finally repentant and remorseful brothers approach Joseph and beg his forgiveness. And the writer records the tender moment this way: “Joseph began to weep when they spoke to him. Then his brothers also wept, and they bowed down before him... But Joseph said to them, ‘Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good ... So, my brothers, have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your children.’”

Human relationships are complicated. Families are freighted with emotional weight and more than enough baggage. No one I know comes from a perfect family. And while I know no family like

Joseph’s, every family is weakened by the things that weakened Joseph’s family. Things like generational dysfunction handed on from parent to child. Parents working out their own unresolved issues in the lives of their children. Love unevenly, even unfairly, apportioned. These figures lifted up in the stories of scripture—they are people just like us, bound to one another. Scripture teaches us that God uses our relationships to accomplish divine purpose. Start right where you are. Start with those to whom you are the closest. Is there reconciliation you need to pursue? Is there forgiveness you need to seek? Is there an apology it’s time to finally accept? Perhaps today can be the day you take the first step.

Wherever your family’s story sits today—if you’re Joseph in the pit, a brother standing on the edge looking down, or Jacob receiving the coat that you never should have given—this story can text you. Its message is this: Trust that God’s silence is not the same as God’s absence. Trust that God is active, behind-the-scenes, working toward redemption and renewal. Trust that God’s plan is more gracious and more true than the shined-up idols we often see or seek to promote. Remember: God chose this family—people like us—to be the bearer of God’s blessing for all the whole world. You and I are offered the same invitation. We can start today. Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/frenemy>

ⁱⁱ <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/frenemy?q=frenemy>

ⁱⁱⁱ Leo Tolstoy, *Anna Karenina*, Penguin Classics, 1994.

^{iv} C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, Simon and Schuster, 1996. p. 104.

^v Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, Westminster John Knox Press, 298-299.