

Dimming the Lights – Genesis 45:3-11, 15

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Before we can gauge the impact of this passage from Genesis, we should first know the back story of Joseph. Joseph was the son of Rachel and Jacob. He was one of many sons, actually. And Joseph and his brothers lived the many ups and downs that brothers live: brotherhood, kinship, and family pride, along with rivalry, jealousy, and resentment.

Joseph appears initially as a spoiled son, favored by his doting father, proud of the pre-eminent place in the family. The father adds to the explosive atmosphere of the family dynamic by giving his favorite son a piece of clothing (that famous multi-colored coat) that marks his pre-eminence and by freeing him from the responsibility carried by the other sons for work with the family flocks.

The brothers succumb to sibling jealousy and seek an occasion to rid the family of their troublemaker. Their resolve increases when Joseph reports dreams that confirm his pre-eminence. Their anger breaks into open violence when Joseph leaves the protection of the father in order to seek out the brothers' condition. Their initial plan to kill him changes to a more economically advantageous plan to sell him to passing merchants; yet the sale is tantamount to killing him.

The merchants sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt. But, Joseph rises from being a servant in a private household to a prominent position in Pharaoh's court. He becomes second in command of the entire kingdom and receives responsibility from Pharaoh to administer grain reserves in a time of famine. He had this responsibility not only for all Egyptians but also for all the people of the world.

Ironically, the famine forces Joseph's brothers, the ones who sold him to the merchants, to travel to Egypt to buy enough grain to sustain their families. And in Egypt, they stand unknowingly at the mercy of Joseph, whom they do not recognize but who recognizes them. And Joseph reveals his true identity to them.

With that reveal did not come the expected emotion that we might have had had we been beaten and, unbelievably, sold into slavery ourselves. The normal reaction, the reflexive human emotion in this situation, would've been anger and resentment. That's how Joseph should've reacted. He should've pounced with words of denouncement and spite, along with holding a grudge and sending his brothers away without a seed of grain to take back home with them.

But Joseph's reaction is profoundly different. His reaction is one of love and generosity. Somehow, amazingly, he's able to look past the misdeeds of his brothers and love them for who they were and what they needed in that moment. And that sentiment is crystalized in this statement that he makes to them upon the reveal: "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors."

Joseph did not forget what the brothers had done to him (he reminds them in this statement: "I am Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.") He doesn't pass it off as if it never happened; he doesn't have amnesia over that terrible time. But within that firm reality, he tells them that he's here to preserve them and their family. And in the end, through kisses and tears, he reconciles with them.

The strength, the courage, the compassion that Joseph has in this situation is almost unbelievable. To love them like he does is irrational. But don't we admire him! And wasn't the world much better served by his generous and loving spirit!

This is the kind of love—and maybe the only kind of love—that brings people together in the most unlikely of moments.

Sometimes I wonder if it's really possible for people to come together in unity in light of the division and animosity that we face in our culture, in our country, and even within the greater church of Jesus Christ. We have become so polarized that we treat people with different political or ideological opinions as though they are enemies, as though they have thrown us into the pit of slavery that Joseph at one time found himself thrown into by his brothers.

What will it take to overcome the differences we have? Will it take only a Joseph-like love to bring us together?

David Brooks is an author and opinion-writer for the New York Times. He's always considered himself and been considered by his readers as a moderate, which is has almost become a dirty word in our public discourse. It seems the moderates have been driven out of the public sphere, drowned out by the more vocal far-left or far-right voices.

In fact, moderates are largely looked down upon as being spineless, unable to establish and hold fast to any strong convictions. However, I think the reality is that most Americans are more moderate than extreme, hovering around the middle on either the left or right sides. Most Americans cling to fairly traditional views while allowing for and respecting new ideas and ways of living (which is a branch of hope for all of us to cling to).

Nine months ago, Brooks, the moderate, started something called "Weave: The Social Fabric Project."

"The first core idea," he says, "was that social isolation is the problem underlying a lot of our other problems. The second idea was that this problem is being solved by people around the country, at the local level, who are building community and weaving the social fabric. How can we learn from their example and nationalize their effect?"

He called these people "weavers." He travelled "around the country and found them everywhere. [He'd] plop into big cities like Houston and small towns like Wilkesboro, N.C., and find 25 to 100 community "Weavers" almost immediately. This is a movement that doesn't know it's a movement.

"Some of them," he says, "work at organizations: a vet who helps other mentally ill vets in New Orleans; a guy who runs a boxing gym in Appalachian Ohio where he nominally teaches young men boxing, but really teaches them life; a woman who was in the process of leaving the Englewood neighborhood in Chicago when she saw two little girls playing with broken bottles in the empty lot across the street. She turned to her husband and said: We're not moving away from that. We're not going to be just another family that abandoned this place.

“Many others do their weaving in the course of everyday life — because that’s what neighbors do. One lady in Florida said she doesn’t have time to volunteer, but that’s because she spends 40 hours a week looking out for local kids and visiting sick folks in the hospital. We go into neighborhoods and ask, “Who is trusted here?” In one neighborhood it was the guy who collects the fees at the parking garage.”

Says Brooks, “We’re living with the excesses of 60 years of hyper-individualism. There’s a lot of emphasis in our culture on personal freedom, self-interest, self-expression, the idea that life is an individual journey toward personal fulfillment. You do you. But Weavers share an ethos that puts relationship over self. We are born into relationships, and the measure of our life is in the quality of our relationships. We precedes me.”

It seems like these so-called “weavers” are able to do what Joseph did with his brothers. Our divisions are strong, maybe not to the extreme of being thrown into slavery by another, but they feel rather deep. Yet, these people are able to look past divisions for the good of the greater community.

Jesus speaks today of the importance of loving your enemies. He speaks frankly, “love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return.” Joseph did that; weavers do that. And we are called to do that with the accompanying help of the Holy Spirit. Joseph depended on God to offer this extraordinary demeanor of forgiveness and compassion. And we can depend on it as well.

On November 17, 1957, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. The title of the sermon was simply, “Love Your Enemies.” I read that sermon this week, and I also listened to part of it. At the beginning of the sermon, King apologizes for being somewhat under the weather that morning. His doctor told him he shouldn’t preach that day, but he wanted to follow through on his commitment anyway. So, he agreed to not enter the sanctuary until he was to preach and then leave the sanctuary right after he finished preaching so that he could go home and back to bed.

Listening to his voice, you can tell he's not well; but the words and the message are as powerful as ever.

Speaking on the importance and difficulty of loving one's enemies, he says this during his sermon:

"I think I mentioned before that sometime ago my brother and I were driving one evening to Chattanooga, Tennessee, from Atlanta. He was driving the car. And for some reason the drivers were very discourteous that night. They didn't dim their lights; hardly any driver that passed by dimmed his lights. And I remember very vividly, my brother A. D. looked over and in a tone of anger said: "I know what I'm going to do. The next car that comes along here and refuses to dim the lights, I'm going to fail to dim mine and pour them on in all of their power." And I looked at him right quick and said: "Oh no, don't do that. There'd be too much light on this highway, and it will end up in mutual destruction for all. Somebody got to have some sense on this highway."

"Somebody must have sense enough to dim the lights, and that is the trouble, isn't it? That as all of the civilizations of the world move up the highway of history, so many civilizations, having looked at other civilizations that refused to dim the lights, and they decided to refuse to dim theirs. And [historian Arnold] Toynbee tells that out of the twenty-two civilizations that have risen up, all but about seven have found themselves in the junkheap of destruction. It is because civilizations fail to have sense enough to dim the lights.⁸ And if somebody doesn't have sense enough to turn on the dim and beautiful and powerful lights of love in this world, the whole of our civilization will be plunged into the abyss of destruction. And we will all end up destroyed because nobody had any sense on the highway of history."

It's tough, but we're called with God's help to dim the lights today — dim the light of hate, resentment, and isolation, so that the dim light of love that welcomes and forgives even our enemies can be seen throughout the world.