

HOW WE TELL THE STORY
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Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

Based on Genesis 37 – 50, The Story of Joseph and His Jealous Brothers

Several years ago I had the chance to reconnect with a woman who had been a very good friend of mine when we were in our twenties. I will call her Melissa.

I had known Melissa as one of the many profoundly gifted lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Presbyterians called by God to pastoral ministry within our denomination *before* we changed the rules and accepted those callings as legitimate.

Melissa was always completely open and gracious—yet firmly unapologetic—about her sexual orientation. But we came of age when it was not an easy time to be an open, gracious, unapologetic lesbian called by God into ordained ministry in the Presbyterian Church. Melissa knew this as she considered the ordination process, so she prayed long and hard about how to proceed.

The first step in the process is to seek support from a local congregation. Melissa believed the congregation she had grown up in might support her, even though it would mean “breaking the rules.” But the pastor was new, and she was not so sure where he stood.

Melissa met with her new pastor, and her worst fears came to fruition. He did not support her. He did agree, however, that she could approach the congregation to see if they would sponsor her through the process. At first, like many Presbyterian congregations at the time, they were divided. Over time, however, as they prayed and studied and discerned God’s call with Melissa, the majority of the congregation—including the pastor—agreed to sponsor her for ordination. As you might imagine, Melissa was delighted.

As the process continued, however, it became clear that there would be serious fallout. Melissa thought she had earned her pastor’s full-fledged support through the congregation’s discernment process. But he abandoned her abruptly, and publicly, and painfully when the consequences of that process included the threat of financial ramifications from a few members of the congregation.

From then on, Melissa’s safety net imploded. She felt utterly betrayed and publicly humiliated by her pastor. And even though Melissa was eventually ordained by her presbytery, and “it all worked out in the end,” the pain had lingered for years.

When I reconnected with Melissa, I asked her about that pain. How was she handling it all these years later?

It turns out, a miracle had occurred.

Melissa had just the day before made peace with the pastor who had betrayed her. “He was completely open and apologetic,” she said. “He did not try to justify his actions at all. He just said he was sorry. And that was that.”

Melissa stopped for a moment and then continued, “I was also able to apologize for the things I had done wrong in the process, too. I was not perfect, either. This work of justice and wholeness is messy. None of us can get it right all of the time.”

I was stunned and humbled by the depth of Melissa's integrity. It takes grace and courage to receive the apology of one who has betrayed you. And even more to apologize in return.

But then Melissa said something even more profound: "It turns out," she said, "I can tell the story of my ordination in two different ways. I can point out the fear and betrayal, the pain and humiliation, the people who used me as their token cause, the people who refused to see me as a human being. Or I can talk about this tiny, average church and this normal human being as their pastor who found themselves struggling honestly and openly with something they did not choose to have before them. But they ultimately had the grace to let me in and let me serve. Both stories are true. It is just how I choose to tell it."

It was Melissa's story in all of its complexity that came to me as I studied the lectionary texts for this week and reflected on the journey of Joseph and His Jealous Brothers throughout a full third of the chapters of Genesis.

Here is the story of a profoundly gifted and talented young man, whose abilities have been celebrated and even coddled by his father. As the story begins, Joseph struggles to claim his gifts for divine purposes, rather than personal ones. He struggles to serve his community without idealism or arrogance or to prove his own worth, but rather for the common good.

Here is the story of a young man whose ego-driven early years evoke jealousy, anger, and fear among his brothers. To the point of being betrayed by those same brothers, sold into slavery, and pronounced dead to his father.

And then the story navigates dramatic reversals of fortune: Joseph becomes a pawn in Pharaoh's court—in one chapter he is falsely accused of sexual assault and in the next chapter he becomes an advisor to the king.

The story continues as Joseph grows into full-fledged adulthood, maturing into gratitude and grace. Becoming someone who – as the great poet Maya Angelou says – "wouldn't take nothin for my journey now." He reconciles with his brothers later in life. And they re-learn how to receive his gifts and his forgiveness with gratitude, rather than jealousy.

It is a story that, in Joseph's telling, truly "ends well."

As would-be murderers and literal slave-traders, it is not the place of Joseph's Jealous brothers to demand he tell his story the way he does.

As a heterosexual woman ordained in the Presbyterian church during the same anti-gay period as my friend Melissa, it is not my place to demand she tell her story the way she does.

We cannot choose for others how to tell their own stories. But when those who have been the most harmed choose to tell *their* stories as evidence of grace and healing and wholeness and hope – and a steadfast love of God that truly does endure forever – the rest of us should pay very close attention.

"You planned evil for me," Joseph says to his brothers, "but God planned it for the good."

The Apostle Paul, no stranger to betrayal, writes something similar in his letter to the Romans: "All things work together for good," he says, "for those who love God and are called according to God's purpose."

I can talk about the horrible things, Melissa says. Or I can point to the joy at the end of the struggle.

Both stories are true, they all say. It is just how we choose to tell it.

Even as I hear myself repeat these words, however, I confess I have trouble saying them. If I am to be honest, I am not the kind of person who says there is a divine reason for everything that happens, including—and perhaps especially—the bad things.

I know this belief “that everything happens for a reason” can be comforting for so many people. I would never try to convince someone who is clinging to this hope in the midst of their suffering that they are wrong to believe there may be benevolent purpose behind it. But in the depths of my soul, I am simply not one of those people who can accept that evil is part of the divine purpose.

Even our baptismal vows insist we renounce it.

When Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, we renounce it as evil. When Melissa’s pastor betrays her, we renounce it as evil. When innocent children are caged on our border and when unarmed African-Americans die at the hands of the state, we renounce it as evil.

What does give us hope and strength and courage from the way Melissa and Joseph and even Paul tell their stories, is I believe, something different than saying those things “happened for a reason.” What their stories are sharing is a deep and abiding faith that is rooted in the firm conviction that whatever evil has befallen them—and whatever evil they have participated in—is not the final answer!

That in spite of all the hardship, in spite of all the ups and downs, in spite of what we all do to one another out of fear and jealousy, God is still working for good. Period.

This does not mean we ignore the pain or forget the despair or explain it away. It does not mean we stifle our anger or stop working for justice or passively accept suffering. It simply means that we trust the final outcome to the goodness of God.

All things work together for good. That is our story.

You intended harm, but God intended good. That is our story.

I can talk about the horrible things, or I can point to the joy at the end of the struggle. That is our story.

May we, who have vowed to glorify and enjoy God forever, even as we insist on renouncing evil, choose to tell this story of faith.

Amen.