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Joseph's Princess Dress and the Possibilities of Reconciliation

Genesis 37:1-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. These are the descendants of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives, and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children because he was the son of his old age, and he made him an ornamented robe. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf." His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us?
Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

He had another dream and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock, and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" "I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.' "

So Joseph went after his brothers and found them at Dothan. They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them they conspired to kill him. They said to one

another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”

Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the ornamented robe that he wore, and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat, and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers,
“What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

In my imagination, I’m an accomplish seamstress. But when I sit down to sew, it is always an exercise in futility. I’m too impatient to cut things out properly. And too much of a novice to know how to fix my mistakes. For every seam I sew, I rip it out three times. Now, this doesn’t stop me from coveting beautiful fabric, and reading the description of gorgeous sewing patterns. Like this coat pattern I want. It’s description says it “features a unique darted saddle sleeve, and a beautifully-faced pleated lining.” Not at all like this new translation of Joseph’s garment: an “ornamented robe.” Maybe the translators need to consult with some sewists, some designers to figure out what it is that Joseph is wearing. I ’m not sure “ornamented robe” is an improvement over the old NRSV, which called it “the coat with long sleeves.” Many of us might remember the translation as “the coat of many colors.” If you’re fancy, you might prefer Andrew Lloyd Weber’s “amazing technicolor dream coat,” though I’m not sure the Hebrew supports this wild interpretation.

Perhaps it seems silly, worrying about what this garment looked like. But the only other time this specific garment is mentioned, it is what David’s daughter, Tamar wears—what all the king’s virginal daughters were wearing, according to 2 Samuel. Which means it’s possible that Jacob has given his son—his child—a pretty princess dress. One can certainly argue that the translation of this particular article of clothing isn’t strictly necessary to understand Joseph’s story. We could just say that Jacob—who struggles his whole life to love well—loves his children unfairly, unequally, which leads to jealousy and violence. But what if the dress matters? What if this is the story of a boy in a princess dress who suffers violence at the hands of those who hate them for being queer? Wouldn’t we then have a story that speaks directly to our particular moment? Wouldn’t we have a

story that pointedly asks, what can a queer kid teach us about God? This kid, the one everyone was sure they didn't need, will be exactly what everyone needs. And God is the one who makes even the most unlikely of love and reconciliation possible.

So, a princess dress. Most of the commentators I read this week were keen to point out that the garment appears in both the story of Joseph and the story of Tamar, but then they went to elaborate lengths to make this comfortable for them, to figure out how to make it "normal"—whatever that curse of a word means. One suggested that this must be a "unisex" garment. As if the virginal daughters of the king would have been pleased to wear a "unisex garment." Admittedly, we should take care to not read modern understandings of sex and sexuality and gender *into* Scripture, but we should also take just as much care to not read modern understandings of "normal" sex and sexuality and gender *out* of Scripture, either, as if we and the ancients share the same understanding of normal. Because increasingly, we know that some—if not many—ancient cultures had sophisticated understandings of sex, sexuality, and gender that went well beyond our "modern" binary thinking. And, increasingly, we *can* hypothesize that there are queer characters in the Bible, who push against the norm and, in so doing, reveal something about God. And maybe Joseph is one of those characters.

Because something happens when Joseph receives this gift from their father. We don't know what Joseph was like before they were 17. Thus far, in the Bible, we know that Jospeh was the child of Jacob's "old age," the longed-for baby of the beloved wife, Rachel, the dreamer. But the dreams don't begin until that princess dress—until their dad gives them the dress, when he sees Joseph as they are, when Jacob loves Joseph as they are. And the dreams tell of a future when the nearly-youngest child, marginalized by the boxes society and family required of them, will grow, will shine!

The way Joseph dreams reminds me of the novel *This Is How It Always Is* by Laurie Frankel. The novel is about a family raising their trans kid. And among the hints that their kid is trans is that the kid draws these pictures of the family, but the kid is a smaller and smaller part of the picture, until they nearly disappear altogether. Joseph's dreams are like the recovery from that: seen for who they are, they become a larger and larger part of the picture.

The problem is that the dreams aren't great for the brothers. The dreams are so self-centered, border-line blasphemy, with the sun and moon and stars bowing down. And Joseph seems so naive for sharing them with their brothers. But how could Joseph predict that the dreams would turn the brothers' indifference into contempt, into disgust, into hate? Hate is the other thing this story has in common with the story of David's daughter Tamar. You might remember that Tamar was raped by her half-brother, Amnon. And afterwards, the Bible says that Amnon loathed her. He hated her—same word. He cast her out, and she tore her princess dress.

There is an irony to hate—Brené Brown teaches that hate is actually fueled by our need for connection. But what hate offers is a“ counterfeit bond” because the connection is about our shared contempt of others, and not on any true belonging. The brothers wanted connection with their father, but they settled for hate of their brother. In fact, it says twice in this text that they hated their brother, and that they are jealous—but this jealousy word rolls up with anger and zeal in the wings. And the word for hate is also used to describe men who “dislike” their wives after consummating their marriages. It is a word of violence tangled up with sex and sexuality. So, as Joseph is happily relating their dreams, and living fully as who they are, there is a sinister reality as the brothers turn to homophobic violence, turning against their sibling, who dared to dream.

But, then, it is the dreams that set everyone free. Because when the dreamer ends up in Egypt, it is their ability to speak the language of dreams that sets them free from prison, earns the Pharaoh’s trust, and, eventually, saves the people from a famine. And not just the Egyptians, but the famine reaches the brothers, too, and they come, vulnerable and starving, to Egypt not knowing that the very official they must ask for help—the person they need—is their own cast-off sibling.

It is in this vulnerability and need that the story finally reaches its true home—and not just the story of Joseph and the brothers, but the story of Abraham and Isaac and Ishmael, the story of Leah and Rachel and their slaves—the true home: reconciliation and love.

The world offers us so many opportunities to hate. But God offers the kind of love and connection that makes reconciliation possible. Where so many use the Bible to justify hate, here is a story where God overcomes division with unity, violence with reconciliation, and hate with love. This is what a queer kid can teach us about God. That we can be our true and whole selves. That the world needs our whole and true selves. And that this kind of vulnerability makes reconciliation possible. And when we admit that we need one another, we truly know the God who is love. Amen.