

“The Sin of Favoritism” Genesis 37

A Chicago bank that once asked for a letter of recommendation on a young Bostonian being considered for employment. The Boston investment house could not say enough about the young man. His father, they wrote, was a Cabot; his mother was a Lowell. Further back was a happy blend of Saltonstalls, Peabodys, and other of Boston's first families. His recommendation was given without hesitation. Several days later, the Chicago bank sent a note saying the information supplied was altogether inadequate. It read: "We are not contemplating using the young man for breeding purposes. Just for work."

This is the story of Jacob's family. This is the story of the sin of favoritism. Youngest son seventeen year old Joseph, worked with his brothers minding the sheep. Joseph reckoned that some of his brothers were not doing a very good job and he reported that to their father, Jacob. Now, out of all the sons that Jacob had, Joseph was his favorite and he made sure that Joseph was always dressed in the very latest gear. One fine day Joseph steps forward and shows off his trendy clothes, especially his coat of many colors, an ostentatious and expensive gift from his father Jacob. He looked handsome. He looked smart. He was a walking work of art (as the song goes)...

One of the evidences of favoritism to the youngest child is to lavish them with gifts that the others did not get as they grew up. Jacob demonstrated his favoritism to Joseph with “a robe of many colors”. This was evidently a beautiful, luxurious long-sleeved tunic. It stood out. When you saw it, you would have noticed the extravagance of it. It was perhaps the kind of coat worn by royalty or nobility. The brothers were not happy.

This regal kind of coat was a symbol of purity. Joseph's multi-colored coat identified him as a man who was morally pure and that his other brothers were not. This certainly is born out in the rest of the story as Joseph stands for moral purity even when tempted to act otherwise. So, Joseph's coat was a symbol of purity...and the brothers were not happy!

This kind of coat was a symbol of position. Just as it was the kind of coat worn by royalty so it was definitely not the kind of coat worn by shepherds. Shepherds wore clothes suited to their dirty work. So, this coat gave

evidence to Joseph's favored position. In his father's eyes, he was not like his other brothers. The special coat flaunted this unequal treatment, threw it in his brothers' faces...now the brothers were incensed.

This kind of coat was also a symbol of authority. Jacob was treating Joseph as the firstborn, which he was to Rachel (perhaps that was Jacob's logic). The coat probably indicated that Joseph would receive all the rights and privileges of the firstborn, including a double portion of the inheritance and becoming the future head of the family. That's authority.

When Joseph's brothers believed that their father loved Joseph more than all of them, they hated Joseph and could not say one kind word to him. Joseph didn't help matters by telling his father and brothers about the dreams he had, because when he did, his brothers hated him all the more. You see, in one of these dreams, Joseph saw his brothers bowing down to him.

Then Joseph had another dream, "I dreamt that the sun, the moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

Jacob his father was exasperated, "Come on, Joseph, what kind of a dream is this? Does this mean that your mother and I and your brothers will bow down to the ground before you?"

Joseph's brothers were so jealous of him that the next time that Joseph came looking for them they planned to kill him.

That day came and one brother plotted out loud, "Here comes the dreamer, let's kill him and throw him into one of these big holes in the ground and we'll say that a wild animal killed and ate him. Then we'll see what will become of his dreams!" When Joseph came to where his brothers were gathered, they stripped him of his coat of many colors and threw him into the hole. When they sat down to eat, they saw a long line of camels approaching loaded down with goods for the markets in Egypt. The camels belonged to the Ishmaelite merchants, actually slave traders.

Another brother, Judah, had an idea which he shared with his brothers, "What good will it do us if we do kill Joseph and try to hide our crime? He is our brother after all, so let's sell him to these travelers."

His brothers agreed, and they pulled Joseph back out of the hole, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And so Joseph was taken to Egypt. (This is where our narrative for today ends.)

How then does this apply to us? Favoritism is not merely a preference; it's a seed that, when sown, grows into a thorny vine, choking out love, unity, and harmony. Joseph's brothers were so consumed by jealousy that they plotted to kill him. But God's providence intervened, and Joseph was sold into slavery instead. His life was spared and a larger narrative was allowed to develop.

He was high and lifted up in his father's eyes... He is low and hated in his brothers'. He is stripped of his royal coat of many colors... He is thrown down into a pit in the desert... He is pulled up from the pit and sold as a slave... He goes down to Egypt.

The Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says this about the brothers while commenting about us:

The brothers are observant and sensitive. They see what the narrator concedes. Jacob is partial. His arbitrary love evokes their hatred. Trouble is sure to come in such a triangle of love and hate... The story contacts our life, for each of us lives at some point in such triangles—as one having been loved too much (Joseph), one loving too much (Jacob), or one feeling loved too little (the brothers).

We all know somebody who is either, apparently, the favorite or who resents somebody else for being the favorite. Everyone of us has had some kind of contact with this sin.

Originally, I had wanted to begin this sermon by showing a 5 minute film clip from the Lord of the Rings to bring home to us the destructiveness of favoritism, but a special license would be necessary for this. No problem unfortunately there are plenty of real examples of favoritism in history that can be found:

1. Roman Emperor Nero (37-68 AD): Nero exhibited extreme favoritism toward his advisor, Tigellinus, who helped him consolidate power. This favoritism led to corrupt and tyrannical rule, contributing to Nero's infamous reputation.

2. King Louis XIV of France (1638-1715): Louis XIV's favoritism towards his minister Jean-Baptiste Colbert and others led to lavish spending, while the rest of the population faced economic hardships.
3. Nepotism in the Papacy: Throughout history, some popes have been accused of favoritism by appointing relatives to important positions within the Church.
4. Political Favoritism: Many political leaders have been criticized for showing favoritism by appointing friends, family members, or supporters to key government positions, even when these individuals may not be the most qualified.
5. Corporate Favoritism: In the business world, instances of favoritism have been observed when promotions or opportunities are given to employees based on personal relationships rather than merit.
6. Education and Admission Scandals: There have been cases where educational institutions have been accused of favoritism in admissions, accepting students based on connections or donations rather than academic achievements.

These historical examples illustrate how favoritism can lead to negative outcomes such as corruption, inequality, and the erosion of trust.

The sin of favoritism goes contrariwise to the purposes of God. God's love is not exclusive. Each one of us is equally valued and cherished in God's eyes. Just as Jacob's favoritism tore his family apart, favoritism within our communities can divide us and prevent us from fulfilling God's plan for unity and fellowship.

Favoritism blinds us to the potential of others. Just as Joseph's brothers failed to see his worth beyond their jealousy, likewise when we play favorites, we limit the contributions and gifts of those we exclude, missing out on the blessings they can bring.

Favoritism brings bitterness and strife. Joseph's brothers' jealousy poisoned their relationships, leading them down a path of deceit and cruelty.

One final and hopeful word is necessary, and that is throughout the Joseph narrative God's role is different than humans.—It is a guiding force, orchestrating events, providing wisdom, and ultimately working out the Divine Plan. God's sovereignty, faithfulness, and ability to bring about good even in the midst of adversity and crushing consequences despite the sin of favoritism win the day!

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