

Good morning. If we've not met, I'm Kathleen Gardner and I'm honored to be here to worship and share a message with you today.

A few months ago, Erin Taylor spoke of the role of Veggie Tales in their house when her kids were little. My girls, too, loved Bob the Tomato and Larry the Cucumber. Those sweet vegetables made Bible stories funny, easy to understand, and memorable. One of the favorites on repeat in our VCR was "The Ballad of Little Joe" which is based on the story of Joseph being sold into slavery. You can imagine my delight when I saw in the lectionary that Genesis 45 was one of the options for scripture for this Sunday. I thought to myself, "I get to retell 'The Ballad of Little Joe'?" I was so pleased! This would be easy - everyone knows that despite the horrible things that happen to Joseph, God makes use of it all.

Ooh, y'all, as a former English teacher, I'm drawn to this story because good wins. The protagonist, Joseph, faces many hardships. Attempted murder, famine, intrigue, slave trading, jealousy among siblings, deceit, all the elements of conflict are present. There are many antagonists starting with the brothers and everyone along the way who tries to get Joseph into trouble or harm him. Man vs. man, man vs. nature - this is a classic tale of [redemption](#). Of course there are lessons for us to learn!

To recap, back in the earlier chapters of Genesis, we learn that Joseph is the favorite son of Jacob. Joseph is not only treated better by Jacob, but Joseph also has weird dreams where he has power over his brothers. Being the ornery little brother, he brags of his dreams and the brothers have enough of Joseph. They fake his death and sell him to some merchants for 20 pieces of silver. The merchants then sell Joseph to a pharaoh in Egypt. By the middle of the story, Joseph has used his dreams to save Egypt from years of famine. The brothers who live

with their father, Jacob in Canaan, now show up in Egypt hoping to buy grain to feed their family.

For 22 years, Joseph has not seen his siblings. He was in captivity for 13 years and has now been a ruler for 9 years. Still, he recognizes his brothers. Can you imagine? We can all see how easily it would have been for Joseph to deny them the grain and send them to a justly deserved punishment. Yet, he doesn't.

Let's look at our scriptures again. Genesis chapter 45, verses 4-7 state, "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'Come close to me.' When they had done so, he said, 'I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! ⁵ And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. ⁶ For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. ⁷ But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.'"

What an ending! Don't be upset - even though you sold me into this, God used it to save you? Full circle redemption. This is so good!

In our New Testament scripture from Matthew chapter 15, verses 18-20, Jesus says, "the things that come out of a person's mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. ¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. ²⁰ These are what defile a person."

Well this makes sense, too! Joseph had God in his heart so his words were pure; they were forgiving; they were gentle. Despite all his reasons to be hateful and mean, he wasn't. Why? because what came out of his mouth came from his heart, and his heart was full of God's love.

Perfect. Got it. Focus on God and not what's been done to you. God will make good things come out of any bad situation. Done! This is easy!

Then I reread the story, and I thought about the brothers.

When I taught characterization in my English class, we learned about static and dynamic characters. Static characters are ones that don't change over the course of the story and dynamic characters do. Usually the protagonist is the dynamic character. He or she learns something profound about himself. There is an understanding, a reckoning or a revelation. This is why we're pleased at the end because the universal lesson is usually taught through the actions of the protagonist. We like it when our hero becomes a better person because he overcame an obstacle. We like to think we, too, would become new and improved versions of ourselves if we faced a similar challenge.

However, this isn't the case with Joseph. He didn't change - he was always good. He's a static character and the lesson isn't taught through him, it's taught through the brothers. Joseph tells them, "And now, **do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves** for selling me here, **because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.**"

Well, I had to pause. How can it be that the lessons are coming from the bad guys?

So I shifted my thinking and I came up with some questions?

1. Might we be the antagonists in our own story?
2. What can we learn from the brothers?
3. How do we make right what we really messed up before?

Sometimes we don't like what we hear - what do we say in return?

Sometimes we don't like what we feel - how do we typically respond?

Let's look for some answers. **Might we be the antagonists in our own story?**

We've all been provoked. Someone says something that aggravates or offends us. Someone has just opened their mouth one too many times. We've all said something or done something when we've been wronged to get back at the other person. The Bible says even Jacob is angry at Joseph for his dreams at one point. This is classic man vs. man conflict. One person against another. An eye for an eye. Our responses often create a greater problem than the original insult we received.

So, what can we learn from the brothers?

There is no doubt the brothers were awful to Joseph. Their actions were criminal and unforgivable. And, they had 22 years to ponder what they'd done. That's a long time to sit with a sin you wish you'd never committed. When they came face to face with Joseph, the verse describes them as "distressed" and "angry" with themselves. This is what makes them dynamic characters. They are seeing their errors and they're agitated. They know they need to right this wrong. If we were to speculate about what happened at Jacob's house over the course of two decades living with a lie and a crime they'd committed, I'd say the brothers' days were spent

filled with guilt and exhaustion. Keeping the truth from their father and keeping up with this story must have been overwhelming.

Can you relate? Have you been there where the weight of what you said or did was overwhelming? Have you been exhausted by your actions or your deceit? Maybe you've never committed a crime as intense as those of Joseph's brothers, but we've all felt a hurt in our heart for an action we knew was wrong.

So how do we fix it? That's our third question - **How do we make right what we really messed up before?**

The good part is **we** can't make right entirely, nor can we make it right on our own, but Jesus can.

Let's look at what Joseph says again. "And now, **do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves** for selling me here, because **it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.**"

Joseph's statement to his brothers can be seen as a foretelling of Christ's purpose in us and for us.

FIRST:

do not be distressed - This Old Testament passage leads us to our savior in the New Testament.

John 16:33 says, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." When we realize we have a problem, or we've caused an issue, Jesus is greater than whatever we're facing and whatever we've done. The answer is found in Jesus.

SECOND:

do not be angry with yourselves Again, this phrase is echoed in Ephesians chapter 4, verses 31-32, “Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. ³² Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”

Forgive the actions that angered you and then ask God to forgive you so you can forgive yourself. Go back to our tale. Remember, we know Joseph’s response when he sees his brothers. Because he relies on God throughout the entire story, he isn’t angered. He doesn’t have to forgive his brothers because God was working through him. He is already solid in his relationship with the Father. This is our goal as well.

THIRD:

it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you.”

Christ is our savior. He went ahead of us and took our sins, bore them on the cross and because of him, our debt is paid, and we are forgiven. Joseph’s brothers are forgiven by Joseph through God’s work like we are forgiven by Christ.

While we may not have ever sold a sibling into slavery, we’ve all said and done things that we regret. Instead of being “distressed and angry” with ourselves, let us come to the Father. Let us repent and ask for God’s mercy.

Through Christ we are no longer static characters trapped by bad decisions and plagued by guilt. Let us become dynamic, living examples of the miracle of God’s forgiveness and the embodiment of change that comes through loving and following Jesus.

Amen.