

If favor were fair (Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28)

Maybe Joseph's brothers aren't evil people but hurt people.

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“That’s not fair!”

I have four children, so as you can imagine, this phrase is familiar in my home. They have thus learned early on, and often on repeat, that fairness is not defined by everyone getting the same thing. That the principles of love and equity mean that we work hard to make sure that everyone gets what they need, and also that everyone gets to experience what they want and like.

And yet the Joseph story has always felt off to me, as I’ve never been able to make sense of the one line that is the catalyst for the context of the entire saga: “Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children.”

Of course, no one should ever, under any circumstances, be sold off into slavery. But now that I am a parent, it is difficult for me not to ask more questions about how Israel was responsible—as were so many other parents throughout the Bible—for sowing seeds of discord and spreading the roots of intergenerational trauma. *Enmity* would here be an appropriate term. And *selfishness* as well.

For even if one does have a “favorite” child—perhaps a child who is more like you, or of a particular gender identity, or whatever else—what the heck was Israel thinking? Decorating one son, the baby at that, in front of everyone else? This cannot possibly be what love looks like: scarcity, conspicuous consumption, and a lack of awareness of the pain and brokenness of one’s own children. What a terrible position to put both Joseph and the rest of the brothers in.

Which leads us to think of what kind of trauma is caused when the mentality of “favor ain’t fair!” leaves someone feeling discarded and unloved and unchosen by a heavenly parent. And the lengths we might go to tend the calluses of our hearts. And the ways that violence seems the only viable solution to a systemic source of inequity when one feels unrecognized.

What happened to Joseph isn’t right or fair, of course not. But I wonder what happens if we cast his brothers not as evil people but as hurt people. And if when we tell the story we think not only of the final redemption but of how to redirect the cycles of blessing so they are rooted beyond hierarchies and logics of competition. Surely dreaming of greatness can’t only be done at the expense of others.

We won’t ever all have the same gifts or roles or aspirations or even the same stations in life. But that doesn’t mean we can’t all matter, that we aren’t all created and called to purpose, that we don’t all have value. Is not our conception of God big enough to imagine that we are all God’s favorite?