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Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

# Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

“Don’t Hate the Dreamers”

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## **Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28**

*37 Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. <sup>2</sup>This is the story of the family 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. <sup>3</sup>Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>12</sup>Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. <sup>13</sup>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." <sup>14</sup>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, <sup>15</sup>and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" <sup>16</sup>"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. <sup>19</sup>They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. <sup>20</sup>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." <sup>21</sup>But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, "Let us not take his life." <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; <sup>24</sup>and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. <sup>25</sup>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. <sup>26</sup>Then Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? <sup>27</sup>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. <sup>28</sup>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.*

## **Philippians 2:1–11**

*2 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy, <sup>2</sup>make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. <sup>3</sup>Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. <sup>4</sup>Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. <sup>5</sup>Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup>who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, <sup>7</sup>but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, <sup>8</sup>he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death — even death on a cross. <sup>9</sup>Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup>so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup>and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

*“Don’t Hate the Dreamers”*  
*Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28; Philippians 2:1–11*

Leopold Von Ranke was a scholar who lived in the mid-1800s. Considered by some to be the father of the study of history, he believed there was something to be gained by studying the progress of humanity over long period of times, so he put together the first timeline of human history. Von Ranke believed that a timeline would show that over time, humanity was getting better and better and better – both in terms of intellect and knowledge and innovation, but also morally and ethically better. As he pieced together the events of human history, he realized that there was indeed steady technological improvement – and technology, of course, encompasses much more than our computers and smart phones; historically speaking, technology includes the use of fire, the invention of the wheel, the development of language, the Industrial Revolution, and so on.

Von Ranke’s timeline revealed this steady improvement in technology, but as he looked at the history of how human beings have interacted with and treated one another, he realized that human behavior – human morals and ethics – was, historically-speaking, characterized by a series of unpredictable and often unexplainable peaks and valleys. Sometimes, human beings were amazing; cultures and countries would get along for extended periods of time, but then, they would crash and burn – war, genocide, horrible violence from one group of people against another. And this cycle would be repeated again and again and again.<sup>1</sup>

After what has happened this weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia, and all week long between the leaders of the United States and North Korea, we hardly need to be reminded that human beings are just as capable of hate and violence and injustice today as they were in any other time in human history. But today’s story from Genesis reminds us of just that. This story is about more than just serious sibling rivalry. It’s a story about hate. It’s right there, in verse four: when [Joseph’s] brothers saw that their father loved Joseph more than all of them, they *hated* him, and could not speak peaceably to him. Joseph’s brothers *hated* him.

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<sup>1</sup> I learned about von Ranke’s work during Shaun King’s lecture at the Chautauqua Institution on August 8, 2017.

When I was a kid, there were two things my siblings and I were not allowed to say. One was “shut up.” The other was the word *hate*. The same rules now apply in my family. We are not allowed to say we *hate* anyone – or, for that matter anything. Not your sister or brother, not a political figure or a celebrity. Not broccoli or cauliflower or Brussels sprouts. The word *hate* is simply not allowed.

The Bible reminds us, both in today’s story and in many others as well, that, whether you’re allowed to use the word or not, hate is an emotion that arises in us all. And most often, in the Bible and in our lives, it can be found within families, where the feelings we have toward other human beings, whether positive or negative, are incredibly intense. Hatred, the Bible insists, exists. It exists within families. Joseph’s brothers *hated* him. They hated him for being their father’s favorite and for the flagrant way Jacob expressed his favoritism. They hated Joseph because his mother Rachel, now dead, had been their father’s favorite wife. They hated Joseph because he flaunted the beautiful coat their father gave him. But most of all, they hated Joseph because of his dreams.

When we read this story in Bible study several weeks ago, pretty much everyone around the table blamed someone different for all the dysfunction in this family. One person was appalled at Jacob’s bad parenting – what did he think would happen when he played favorites like that? Another person blamed Joseph for being arrogant and insensitive – he almost seems to enjoy basking in the glow of his father’s love in front of his brothers even more than he enjoys his father’s special attention. Someone else blamed the brothers – yes, they are mistreated by Jacob and Joseph, but there is nothing that could ever justify their intent to kill their own brother. Whoever you blame for this story, we can all agree, this family is a total mess. Unlike our families, right? Let’s be honest, we are all familiar with the dynamics of this story. In my experience, every family is a mess – in some way and to some degree – and this includes church families.

If we read the Bible, this should come as no surprise. Right here in the book of Genesis we have multiple stories of family members being downright nasty to one another. And here’s the wonderful, and perhaps surprising thing: the Bible does not explain or apologize for such families. They exist. This story lets those of us who are part of families – or churches or even countries – that

are less than perfect know that we have company. Not just historical company. *Biblical* company.<sup>2</sup>

Von Ranke and other students of history have looked at the ups and downs of humanity's ethics and morals over time, and discovered a pattern. It tends to be after some kind of innovation that humanity's morals take a dive. To offer a few examples, after the Emancipation Proclamation and the end of legal slavery in America came the era with the highest incidence of lynching; after the passing of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act came the exponential rise in the incarceration of African Americans; and after the first African American president and the first female candidate for president came the increased visibility of the kind of white nationalist groups that convened in Charlottesville this weekend. Apparently, innovations create the kind of disturbance and fear that can lead to a rise in amoral behavior, the hateful treatment of one group of human beings against another.

Today's story follows this exact pattern, except the innovation in this story is not an invention or a discovery. It is a series of dreams. Joseph is a dreamer. Now God is not mentioned once in today's story, but from our knowledge of the Bible, we know that God often works through dreams, especially dreams of a future transformed. Joseph certainly dreams of a future transformed. Although our portion of this text skips the explanation of Joseph's dreams, his dreams are of a future where he holds power and his family is subordinate to him in some way. He dreams of a world where the younger rules over the older, where the bottom becomes the top. Joseph's brothers don't like these dreams one bit. In fact, it is the dreams that lead them to behave so badly...that they try to kill their own brother.

Joseph may be one of the first dreamers whose dreams bring out the worst in others, but he certainly isn't the last. When we hear someone's dream, especially the kind of dream that imagines a world turned upside-down, it can be shocking...and even scary. And when we are feeling scared, we are rarely at our best. But over and over again in the Bible, we discover that God is in the business of giving out dreams. Dreams of a world turned upside-down, dreams in which the poor and marginalized receive abundant blessings, dreams that those who have been unfairly persecuted will finally know justice.

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<sup>2</sup> In this sermon I am indebted to the Rev. Amy Miracle and her sermon "Dream On," delivered at Broad Street Presbyterian Church on October 16, 2016. Used with permission.

My friend Jeff works for World Vision, a global humanitarian organization with a dream to eradicate poverty and injustice wherever it exists. A few years ago on a trip to Ethiopia, Jeff was standing at a water source miles from the nearest village. The water was visibly dirty and there were animals bathing in it. But as Jeff stood there, a young Ethiopian boy walked up to the water and began to drink from it. When he stood up, Jeff noticed that he was wearing an oversized yellow t-shirt that said, "I have a dream." Jeff began a conversation with this boy and discovered that, although he had once attended school and was one of the most successful students in his class, he had to drop out to help his family by coming to this water source each day to bring some back to his family. Jeff has traveled all over the world and seen more than his share of poverty and injustice, but what happened next surprised even him. The boy looked at him and said, "Now that you have heard my story, what are you going to do with this information?"

Our dreams – at least the ones that come from God – call us to action. When Joseph's brothers heard Joseph's dreams about a whole new future, they hated him for it. So much so, they plotted to kill him. Except for Reuben and Judah, who acted to save him. These two had the courage to suggest that maybe, just maybe, they didn't have to go to such extremes.

Now, you could argue that Reuben's idea to throw Joseph in a ditch and Judah's plan to sell him let into a life of slavery were about as bad as the plan to kill him, but as we will see next week, God is going to continue to work through Joseph and his dreams, so Judah's and Reuben's willingness to stand up to their brothers and keep Joseph alive has huge implications for the future of this messed up family and for the whole family of God. When we are willing to listen to the God-given dreams of others, it can bring change to the most unexpected places.

Last year, after the election, when a lot of people were struggling to make sense of the dreams they have for our country and whether those dreams could be realized, one of you came to the church leadership with an idea to host an interfaith prayer service on President's Day, when we would gather in our sanctuary with people of many faiths and pray for our country and its leaders. Now this dream could easily have been met with fear or doubt; it could have been seen as too risky or potentially divisive. But instead the church leaders listened to this dream said, yes, let's do it. And so we did, and people came, and

we prayed and worshiped together, with people of diverse faith traditions – and even diverse political views.

When it feels like things in our world are falling apart around us, when we find ourselves growing increasingly overwhelmed in the face of division and hatred racism and sexism, the threat of nuclear war, the evidence of global warming, it is natural to want to escape or avoid the challenges we face or to find someone to blame or to fear. As history repeatedly shows, it is instinctual to let hatred take over. But what if, instead, we opened our minds and hearts to those around us who have the courage and the audacity to dream a better future? What if we muster the courage to share our God-given dreams with each other, that we might work together to make them reality?

One of our fundamental values here is that all the members of the church are its ministers, which means that we all share the responsibility and privilege of listening to the dreams that God is giving us. Dreams are a way of imagining a future that is different from the present. Change – real change – always begins with dreams. And dreams, God's dreams for us, are stronger than conflict, stronger than division, stronger than hate.

So, together, as followers of the God of love and justice, in the face of hate and division and conflict, let us dream the unthinkable, the impossible, the questionable, the risky. Let us dream up a new future for our less than perfect families; let us dream up a new future for our less than perfect nation; let us dream how our faith community can find new ways to transcend hate and bring God's healing and justice and love to our hurting world and to one another.

Amen.