



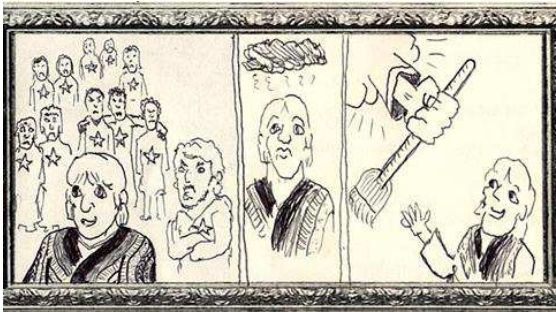
Blind Spots

Vienna Presbyterian Church
The Rev. Dr. Peter G. James
Genesis 37:17b-36

September 20, 2015

Blind spots; we all have them. We have at least one blind spot. It's located on the retina of our eyes. The retina is the lining along the back of our eyes that is sensitive to light. It sends messages to the brain by way of the optic nerve. The place where the optic nerve leaves the retina is called our blind spot. It's the one place where our retina has no photoreceptors and can't detect light. We're not aware of this blind spot since our eyes compensate by filling in this missing information. The retina sends messages to the brain at the speed of 10 million bits per second. We are, in the words of the Psalmist, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (139:14).

Everyone in today's story has a blind spot. Father Jacob's blind spot is playing favorites with his 12 sons. Pride is Joseph's blind spot, Jacob's son of privilege, and jealousy is the blind spot of his 11 brothers. These blind spots are identifiable to us as readers and the people in the story, but oblivious to Jacob, Joseph and the 11 brothers.



On the back page of our bulletin we provide space for children to sketch the story. Last Sunday after worship, a nine-year-old girl showed me the drawings her father sketched while I was preaching. In the first panel, Joseph proudly wears his amazing technicolored dream coat while his brothers look on with jealousy and hatred. Each brother is wearing a star on his robe to correspond to Joseph's dream. Joseph will pay a heavy price for his pride in today's story. His brothers will take away his cherished robe, throw him into a cistern and sell him into slavery. That's why, in the second panel, a cloud of gloom settles over Joseph. But as the third panel indicates, God is about to take a broom to Joseph and his family to sweep clean the mess in their lives. Nice work, Bill!

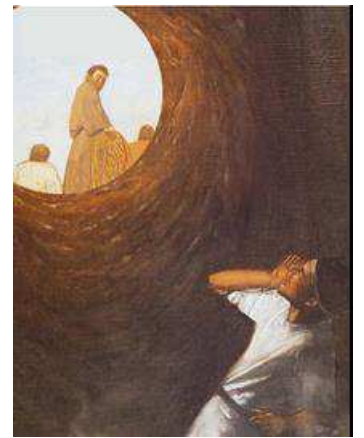
We pick up the story in the 12th verse of Genesis 37. Joseph's brothers have left Hebron to find pasture in Shechem. This is not the next pasture. Shechem is some 50 miles away from Jacob's homestead. At such a safe distance, Joseph will be fair game to bear the brunt of his brothers' hostility.

Joseph is sent by his father to check on his brothers. He searches aimlessly until he meets a man who tells him that his brothers have relocated to a town 13 miles down the highway. What a coincidence. Joseph just happens upon the man who knows his brothers' whereabouts. You'll be fascinated by the sheer number of coincidences before this story is finished. When everything is said and done, what we call coincidences won't be coincidental after all.

His 11 brothers recognize Joseph coming over the horizon. You can't miss him in his coat of many colors. They say, "Here comes the dreamer." They initiate plans to murder him and throw him into an abandoned well. This is jealousy gone wild. They figure if they kill the dreamer, his dreams will die with him.

Reuben, the eldest, steps forward to foil the plan. You can cast him into a cistern if you'd like, but don't kill him. Then, Reuben can circle back later and rescue his forlorn brother. Before you give Reuben special commendation, let me remind you of something. He's been trying to get on his father's good side ever since he slept with one of his father's wives (Genesis 35:22). There are no exemplary people here in this story.

The brothers accept Reuben's proposal. They strip the prima donna robe off Joseph, throw him into a pit and sit down to a meal. The picture of Joseph pleading for mercy (42:21) while his brothers enjoy a picnic together shows just how messy this story has become.



A caravan of Ishmaelites happens upon the scene. Brother Judah proposes they sell Joseph to these wandering Bedouins. They might as well make money off this little twerp. They sell him for 20 shekels, the going rate for a slave.

Don't miss the irony here. The Ishmaelites are Joseph's distant cousins. Joseph's great grandfather Abraham is married to Sarah. They are unable to have children so they contract with Hagar to serve as a surrogate. Hagar bears a son named Ishmael. Later, Abraham and Sarah give birth to a son Isaac. In an ironic twist of circumstances, Isaac's grandson Joseph is sold to Ishmael's descendants. It is not lost on me that Muslims claim their lineage through Ishmael while Christians and Jews trace their ancestry through Isaac.

The brothers attempt to cover up their evil plot. They roll Joseph's coat in goat blood and show it to their father as proof that Joseph has been slain by wild animals. Jacob is understandably heartbroken and refuses to be consoled. We're told, in the last verse of the chapter, that Joseph is sold to Potiphar, one of Egypt's leading officials. Remember this little tidbit. It's going to factor big time into the next segment. Come back next Sunday for the next installment of our story.

If only the people in our story had become aware of their blind spots!

Eighty-five people from our church attended the Global Leadership Summit last month. Bill Hybels, the keynote speaker, spoke in the opening session about The Five Intangibles of Leadership. The second intangible is self-awareness. Hybels identified how low self-awareness is a primary contributor to leaders making poor decisions. These bad choices leaders make often result from unresolved issues from their past—what Hybels identifies as blind spots.

Hybels quoted the research that people have on average 3.4 blind spots. I couldn't help asking as I prepared this sermon, what are my blind spots? I'm not sure I want to know my blind spots, but I pushed through my resistance. Last week, I asked several people who know me well about my blind spots.



One blind spot surfaced repeatedly in conversation with people. I avoid conflict. I'm a classic conflict-avoider. My forté is helping people get along. Confronting conflict directly is hard for me. It always has been! I'm a classic middle child. I want to help people get along. I don't bring this up so you will use it against me. I reference it to illustrate that we all have blind spots, every last one of us.

Blind spots may be invisible to us but obvious to other people, sometimes glaringly obvious! We're blind to our blind spots.

Blind spots on the highway aren't visible through our rear view and side mirrors. Blind spots are a major cause of highway accidents.

Ask God to graciously help you recognize your spiritual blind spots. Get feedback from people who know you well. Ask people for their honest feedback.

You may not want to know your blind spots. But what if these blind spots are keeping you from flourishing in job or family? It certainly unraveled the Ben Jacob family. Identifying our blind spots could help us immensely in family and work life.

We have preached sermons on five Old Testament patriarchs over the last five years. We've examined the life of Abraham, Moses, David, Jacob and Joseph. I've noticed something about all these Biblical heroes. Every last one of them is flawed in some significant way.

Abraham lied about his wife. Moses killed a man and tried to duck God's call to tell Pharaoh to let his people go. Jacob, as his name implies,

was a deceiver. He deceived his father and brother out of the family birthright and blessing. Joseph was too proud for his own good. And David, this man after God's own heart, was an adulterer and a murderer. I grew up thinking David was a hero on account of his virtues. Now I regard him as a hero in spite of his flaws. He's both saint and sinner rolled into one. His flaws do not eliminate him from being used of God.

One reason I trust the Bible is on account of the way it portrays its heroes. There's no attempt to airbrush sin from their lives. No one is given a clean bill of health.

Why do our biblical heroes have flaws? Because that's what God has to work with! We urge you to read the Bible so that you come to recognize yourself in this story.

Every Biblical hero is flawed. But that's precisely the point. All of us are flawed, each in our own way.

The writer of Psalm 14 puts it this way: "The Lord looks down from heaven on all humanity to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. All have turned away, all have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, no, not one" (14:2-3).

There is in the Bible one flawless person: Jesus Christ. He's the only one who lived a sinless life. He lived life as God intended it. He is thereby uniquely qualified and positioned as the flawless one to atone for our sins.

Justice must be served in God's world. As I have watched the Syrian refugee crisis unfold, I appreciate why God demands justice. The perpetrators of this atrocity and smugglers who profit from it will be held accountable to God. Justice will be served! There are consequences for sin—our sins included—and Jesus is the one who pays the price for our rebellion.

At the cross, justice and mercy come together as one. There is justice on human sin and Jesus pays the penalty. But there is also grace for the sinner. What an ingenious solution to the problem posed by sin. At the cross, there is justice for sin and grace to the sinner.



It's hardly coincidental that Joseph's story is the longest literary narrative in Scripture. It squares with everything we know about God's Big Story. We are at one and the same time deeply flawed and deeply loved.

I am a sinner. You are also. We are deeply flawed. We are also deeply loved and God offers us a Savior. Won't you trust this Jesus to be your Savior? Won't you come?

