

“Frenemies”

Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

Friends. Enemies. Put them together and you get “Frenemies.” One of the most extreme examples of frenemies that I’ve heard was from Tony Campolo who has been the featured speaker at several of our National Youth gatherings. One of Tony’s stories goes like this . . .

I recently had the privilege of meeting with more than 25 survivors of Auschwitz. We had breakfast together. I asked them, "After what you went through at the hands of the Nazis, how do you react when you hear someone with a German accent?"

One of the men answered, "I was just a boy when they put me, along with my family, into a cattle car in a city in France and started us on the long journey to Auschwitz. We had no water and we had no food, but each night the train would stop and sit still for hours.”

“Time and time again, after hours had passed, there would be German people who would sneak out of the forest, come up to the sides of the cattle cars and push in between the slats of the car small containers of water and bits of food. Their generosity kept me alive. What they did was done at great risk. So - whenever I hear someone with a German accent, I say to myself, 'Could that be the child or the grandchild of one of those who dared to help me in my time of need?' Then I smile at them inevitably."

Tony Campolo continues . . . “Every time I recall this story I become increasingly more convicted. Of all experiences from which hatred could develop in an understandable way, Auschwitz has to be at the top of the list. Yet you could see that this man did not hate his German brothers and sisters. He chose to see the potential valor in each German citizen rather than the potential hatred.”

The Bible is filled with stories of frenemies – especially the Book of Genesis. Think of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Abram and Lot, Sarah and Hagar, Esau and Jacob, Jacob and Laban, and in our Genesis text today - - Joseph and his brothers. And notice how all of these Genesis frenemies are members of the same family. Genesis is definitely a book about dysfunctional families. So as we take a look at Joseph’s frenemy relationship with his brothers, think about the frenemy relationship in your family.

I would observe that frenemies were more prevalent in Old Testament families because husbands usually had more than one wife. Jacob not only had two wives, but they were sisters, Rachel and Leah.

Wives, try to imagine the family dynamics, if you were sharing your husband with your sister. It doesn’t happen very often these days, but it happens. The one time I had to deal with it as a pastor, it got very ugly. Talk about Frenemies!

Husbands, try to imagine being married to your wife and your wife’s sister. Some of us would choose death!

As a wife and mother in Genesis, you were valued by how many sons you bore. Leah bears 10 sons while Rachel bears none. Finally, Rachel is blessed with two sons, Joseph and Benjamin. Jacob’s family is prime for frenemies!

In verse 3, we learn that Jacob loved one of his sons, 17 year-old 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.”

So Joseph is not only the favorite, but also pampered. You can imagine how this went over with Joseph's 10 older half-brothers. Verse 4 tells us that "when his brothers saw that their

father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him". They were frenemies.

This antagonism boils over one day, when father Jacob sends Joseph to some distant fields, to see how his brothers are doing with the flock. Father sends his favorite son to make sure his older brothers are doing their job. Not good!

The brothers see Joseph from a distance and immediately conspire to kill him. But even within their ranks, they cannot come up with a unanimous opinion - brother Reuben convinces them not to kill him, but merely throw him into a pit. So they grab Joseph, strip him of his precious robe with sleeves and throw him into a waterless pit.

Then they sit down to eat. As the brothers are munching their lunch, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, carrying a load of gum, balm and resin to Egypt. Remember the Ishmaelites are descendents of Ishmael, the son of Abraham and his concubine, Hagar, whom Abraham's wife Sarah gave him permission to be with when she could not conceive. Of course, Ishmael is not sooner born when Sarah becomes pregnant with Isaac and sends Hagar and Ishmael packing. Isaac is Joseph's grandfather. Talk about a dysfunctional family!

Now Joseph's brothers are going to sell him to Ishmael's grandchildren who are distant cousins.

In verses 26-27, Judah said to his brothers, "What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 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.

So they draw Joseph out of the pit and sell him for 20 pieces of silver. And the traders take Joseph to Egypt where the story gets even more interesting. What's driving this story is

the frenemy factor. Joseph was their own flesh but his brothers hated him. They were part of the same family but resentful and competitive. The brothers despised Joseph because he was the favorite son.

All the way back to Adam and Eve, we are hard-wired to judge one another, and to hate one another. We judge people all the time - coworkers, neighbors, church members, classmates, strangers, friends, enemies, frenemies. Often, our judgments are harshest toward the people closest to us because we resent or envy the advantages they seem to have over us. We label them totally undesirable and try to knock them down in order to build ourselves up. Hate can make us do some outrageous things.

So what can we do to quench the destructive flames of hatred? Water or foam won't do it. We can't blow it out or smother it. The only fire extinguisher that will work on hate is forgiveness.

Joseph discovers this many years later, after he has risen to power in Egypt. In a time of great famine throughout the region, people from many neighboring countries come to Egypt to buy grain - including 10 of Joseph's brothers. They do not recognize Joseph, who is now governor over all the land. But Joseph recognizes them, and initially he treats them like strangers, speaks harshly to them and accuses them of being spies.

Can you blame him? After all, they had stripped him, thrown him into a pit and sold him to slavery.

Joseph decides to test them by asking them to return home with a load of grain and fetch their youngest brother Benjamin. He says, "Bring your youngest brother to me, and I shall know that you are not spies but honest men" (v. 34). They do this, and then Joseph reveals himself to

his brothers, saying to them, "I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life" (45:4-5).

Joseph discovers that there is a power at work in his life that is bigger and stronger than hatred. Although the brothers clearly intended to do harm to Joseph, God intended it for good - in order to preserve the people of Israel (50:20).

God transformed an act of hatred into love. He took a horrible misdeed and used it to start a chain of events that would save a large number of people. And when Joseph sees that this has happened, he quenches the hatred between himself and his brothers with an act of forgiveness. Joseph realizes that the rule of God is much more important than his own rule as the governor of Egypt.

Through the power of God, the frenemy factor suddenly tips toward friendship.

Forgiveness can work as a fire extinguisher today as well. We can use it when a coworker undermines us, a friend disappoints us, a classmate gossips about us or a romantic partner hurts us. The truth about the offense must be named, such as Joseph did when he said to his brothers, "You intended to do harm to me." But it is equally important to release them from the offense, as Joseph did when he spoke kindly to them and said, "Have no fear" (50:19-21). To tell the truth and release from guilt - these are the actions that can douse the flames of hatred.

Forgiveness is usually private, but it can be very public. In June of last year, the city of Detroit was focused on an amazing performance in a baseball game between the Tigers and Indians. A pitcher for the Tigers, Armando Galarraga, was throwing a perfect game and needed just one more out in to become the 21st pitcher in the history of Major League Baseball to pitch

one. Then Jim Joyce, an experienced 54-year-old umpire, made a horrible mistake. He incorrectly declared that a batter from the Indians was safe at first base, ruining Galarraga's perfect game.

The crowd at the ballpark began to boo, and for a moment Jim Joyce was the most hated man in America. And it was not just baseball fans who despised him - Joyce hated himself. "I did not get the call correct," said the ump, with tears in his eyes. "I took a perfect game away from that kid."

The frenemy factor was tipping toward enemy, but it did not stay there for long. Joyce had made a bad mistake, but he was not a bad guy. He apologized to Armando Galarraga, the pitcher accepted his apology and the two men hugged.

Suddenly, the flames of hatred were extinguished, and two potential enemies were reconciled. Baseball fans discovered that hate is not the only emotion that feels pure and clarifying - forgiveness does as well.

Galarraga and Joyce discovered this. As did Joseph and his brothers. We can do the same.

Forgiveness has the power to turn frenemies into friends.

#603 – God, When Human Bonds Are Broken