

Reading the Joseph story after Charlottesville

Anyone who seeks to divide people is working against God. And refusing to say that is sin.

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When I was a kid, our family went to see *Saving Private Ryan* after church on Easter Day. I am not sure that I'd call it a resurrection story, but it wasn't a bad way to spend the afternoon. There's a scene near the end of the film where the title character is standing in a military cemetery, asking the graves of those who died trying to save his life whether he'd earned their sacrifice. Whenever I see that scene, the floodgates open, and I start crying like a baby. In fact, it doesn't even matter whether I've seen the whole film. If I flip through the channels and happen across that cemetery scene, I can't help but weep.

On Sunday morning, we'll hear the tiniest sliver of the Joseph story ([Genesis 45:1-15](#)), but it's still enough to make my eyes well up with tears. Earlier this year, our men's Bible study read the Joseph story. Unlike the lectionary, which skips from yesterday's reading of Joseph being sold into slavery to the moment when he reveals himself to his brothers, we read every chapter and, even though we knew the outcome, wondered whether Joseph would survive, when he would show himself to his siblings, and whether he would ever be reunited with his father. Over and over in our study, I reminded the class that there must be reunification. The patriarchal story, which concludes with Jacob, must end with unity. We can't have one of the tribes estranged until after this part of Israel's history is finished. Still, we spent months enduring the ups and downs of the narrative until, at last, we could celebrate with Joseph and his brothers.

Typically, I would be drawn to Joseph's line about God being responsible for everything that happened: "So it was not you who sent me here, but God." That's a powerful statement of looking-back theology from which contemporary theologians

and contemporary Christians shy away. Would we really say that God made that happen just because it ended well? There's so, so much to say about that. Combine it with the NT lesson from [Romans 11](#) about God's promises being irrevocable, and you've got a great mind-spinning sermon about how God works throughout human history. That's what I'd typically focus on. That's where I'd usually be drawn. But not this year.

Today, I find it impossible to read the story of Joseph and his brothers and hear the words of Psalm 133 and not think of Charlottesville, Virginia. When my eyes fill with tears at the thought of Joseph's reunion with the same brothers who sold him into slavery, I cannot see anything but the police barricades that attempted to separate white-supremacists from counter-protesters. When I hear the song about how good and pleasant it is when the brethren dwell together in unity, I cannot hear anything but the loud, clear, dull thud of the car allegedly driven by James Alex Fields plowing into human beings, killing Heather Heyer, who was there to stand up to hatred. This coming Sunday, a week after the violence, when I hear God's plan for unity among estranged brothers, I will ask myself when that vision for unity will be a reality in this world.

God's plan for this world is unity. We read that not only in this Sunday's lessons but throughout scripture. God's dream, seen by God's prophets, is of a time when all nations will know God and stream together under his protection. Abraham is promised to become a light for all nations. Through Jesus' outstretched arms on the hard wood of the cross, God is reconciling the whole world to himself. So good and godly is that unity that it can be compared with oil running down Aaron's beard—a sign of anointing and abundance. Anything and anyone who seeks to divide the peoples of the earth is, therefore, working against God, and anyone who refuses to say so is complicit in their sin.

When we describe white male murderous car drivers who plow into crowds as "lone wolves" and not "domestic terrorists," we are standing on the side of Satan. When we fail to make the explicit connection between the alt-right movement and the ethnic cleansing that their forebears enacted upon God's people, we are standing on the side of Satan. When we say that "both sides" of demonstrators in Charlottesville need to refrain from violence and hatred without also distinguishing between those who wear white hoods and use Nazi salutes and those who advocate for dignity and respect for all people, we are standing on the side of Satan. Hatred and violence and bigotry are always wrong. They are never excusable. When we pretend that they are

not at the root of what happened in Charlottesville, we are standing on the side of Satan.

God is working to bring all peoples together. Under God's reign, there is neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free. In Christ, we are all one. The work of God, therefore, is carried out by those who stand up against hatred and who name bigotry and bigots for what they really are. The alt-right may be a political movement, but it is not only about politics. It is about hatred. It is about violence. It is about everything that stands in the way of God's reign being established here on earth. It is anti-Christ, and followers of Jesus must be willing to say so or else Satan wins.

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