

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Proper 14, Year A  
August 13, 2017

In art, negative space is defined as the space around and between the subjects of an image. Negative space may be most evident when the space around a subject, not the subject itself, forms an interesting or artistically relevant shape, and such space is occasionally used to create an artistic effect as the "real" subject of an image. The negative space, the empty space, becomes what we should be looking at or attending to, or where we find that which inspires us, and amazingly, our brain seems to leap to see this image in the negative space rather adroitly. I'm sure we've all seen the image portraying a white vase and have been fascinated when our eyes seem to quickly shift to see the profiles of two silhouette faces looking at each other. The negative space is what we were actually supposed to see.

Negative space can draw our attention and reveal the truth in art, as well as, I believe, in relationships, in family dynamics. After all, don't you often find that the family secret is what really drives the dynamics in a family? That which will never, could never be shared, contains the power to control behavior for generations to come. Sometimes you may find it is not what is said in an argument that really matters, but rather what goes unsaid. Or the absence of the same sweet tone in the mother's voice to the son who feels less favored, seems to speak volumes to everyone. The negative space, that which is not spoken, that which is not given, that which is lacking in response or emotion, I believe can strongly influence family dynamics.

Negative space in the way a story is told can also be a powerful tool to reveal the truth the author is inviting us into. This is true in our narrative about Joseph this morning. His father Jacob loved Rachel. It is one of the few places in the bible where love between a husband and wife is mentioned so clearly and succinctly. Jacob loved Rachel, from the moment he set eyes upon her at the well. Yet he was tricked into first marrying her sister Leah. The negative or empty space that drives this narrative is in Jacob's heart. His other wives, the one he was tricked into marrying and the slaves given to him for procreation of children, bore child after child to him. Ten sons and one daughter were born through women he didn't love. I imagine he felt some attachment to the children. I imagine he delighted that the promise of God was being fulfilled that he would carry forward the blessing of God to become the father of nations. And I also imagine, when he looked at the family gathered in the evening by the kitchen fire, and he looked from one to the next son, and there was a negative or empty space, always present, where he yearned for one of his own, one born from his love of Rachel. I imagine the boys picked up on this, saw the wistful look in their father's eyes as he looked at them and then beyond them, staring off into space, and even in that fraction of a second of the gaze, they knew they weren't enough. The empty space in Jacob's heart held the truth that they always knew, but never talked about, they were not enough. Jacob loved Rachel. He wanted their union to bear fruit, so he could love their child with a love he not yet experienced with his other children. He longed to know how the depth of his love for Rachel, the wife he loved, would be deepened by bearing a child together.

It is no wonder that the brothers despised Joseph. Upon his birth, they saw the lift in their father's spirit, they noticed the adoring way their father looked upon this baby. His face would shine with a gladness they had never seen before, they noticed the increased closeness between Jacob and Rachel, which had not ever been seen between their mothers and Jacob. Jacob's empty space had been filled with Joseph's birth. The empty space, the negative space, the space filled with longing for their father's love and affection, within the brothers had been amplified. The negative space of longing for love drives the action in this story.

Maybe Jacob could have, should have, kept his favoritism more hidden. His blatant display of this special love of Joseph in the gift of the fancy long-sleeved coat, which signified a special status, one that reversed the cultural norm that the eldest son typically held, didn't help. And Joseph sharing his dreams where his brothers would all bow down to him, may not have needed to be said in that way, with Joseph naively expecting them to be delighted in that fact, that the one called to be their helper would become their master. After all, hadn't he heard the wisdom that if it's not kind nor necessary, then don't say it? What was he thinking? Or maybe Joseph sensed his brothers' negative space, the unspoken bad energy, and Joseph wanted to get back at them. The only way to combat their hatred of him was to claim a sense of dominion and privilege, and we know that's always a slippery slope. And maybe Joseph didn't have to come back and tattle on his brothers and be the righteous one in a way that further separated him from his brothers. But I bet none of that mattered. The fullness Jacob felt at the birth of Joseph set this plot in motion. The loneliness, the yearning for more, the emptiness in the hearts of the brothers each time Jacob looked at them and then beyond toward whom he wished for, the one he would love upon Joseph's birth, drove the action in this story. The set up for the confrontation experienced in our narrative this morning happened way before Joseph's dreams and his stumbling upon the brothers out in the wilderness, away from their father's protection.

We have negative space, that which is not spoken, that which reveals the truth, that which drives the action, here in our story before Joseph is born, during his life with his brothers, and after their selling of him to the Midianites, off to Egypt.

Just imagine for a moment the horror of the family life after the brothers return without Joseph? The negative space, the words not to be spoken, that words which hold the truth that can never be shared, that the brothers came home with when they allowed their father to come to the incorrect conclusion that Joseph had been killed? The brothers may have gotten rid of Joseph physically, but he was still there in the household. I can't imagine that any of those brothers could ever have looked their father in his eyes again, for they would see the emptiness they saw before Joseph was born and they could not bear it, because they have now caused it. Emptiness, deception, despair, this empty space ruled the household and drove the action.

There are two challenging questions for us in this story. I'll let you pick which one fits you right now.

The first one is: Does God, like Jacob looking at and beyond his 10 sons, when looking into our souls, want more from us? Does God see our incompleteness or our unwillingness to give all that we have and all that we are to our life in God, and yearn for more from us? Do we need to look at whether we love God with all our heart, mind, body and soul? Is there more that we can give, more whom we can love, more to whom we can reach, more within us to stretch, more within us to care, space within us to move beyond ourselves. I believe God wants us to go there, until the space within us has been wholly given over to be God's space, when all possibilities are explored, when all doors are thrown open, when we no longer quiver in fear of not having enough if we give it all away, and we embrace the love of God. God sees the negative space in our soul and doesn't want that to be our truth.

However, of course, these challenging questions beg the larger question – does God love us in our incompleteness? In our allowing of ourselves to not be fully who we can be? Absolutely yes. As Desmond Tutu says, “There is nothing we can do to make God love us more, and there is nothing we can do to make God love us less.” Yet, that statement should not lead us into a place of complacency, for I do believe that God is yearning for what we have not yet birthed in our lives, as Jacob yearned for Joseph before his birth, so that the negative space, the unspoken parts of our lives no longer drive the action of our lives, but rather it is the God part of our souls, the creative positive part of our souls, that drives the course of our lives.

Our best chance of changing negative space to God space in our hearts is when we allow ourselves to be transformed, when we allow our faith to go from our head to our heart, when we stretch out our hand and receive something life-giving from Christ, his body and blood, and we change, and we love. As Christians, we want our actions to speak louder than our non-actions. We want the truth we claim as members of the body of Christ to be stronger than the secrets we hide.

So, the first challenging question is: does God see the emptiness or negative space in our souls and yearn for us to become more? or birth more of God's goodness in our lives? The answer to that question for each one of us is “absolutely yes”.

The second challenging question is: rather than seeing the emptiness or incompleteness that we need to fill, does God see the negative space, wishing that we have it all? Does the generous and abundant God want to give us more? The answer to that question is undoubtedly “yes”, but the question to ourselves is “Can we receive that?” Can we take it all from God? For that will involve opening ourselves, creating a space for vulnerability, for change, for radical reorientation of our lives, to letting grace cling to and release pain, to finding ourselves worthy of God's love.

Each challenge is right and hard, whether it is allowing ourselves to be transformed to become all that God desires of us, or whether it is allowing ourselves to be transformed to receive the fullness of God's love. Negative space has power, but God's love has greater power. Let us allow that, God's love, to be what drives our lives. Amen.

