

“All In The Family”

The Rev. Drew Willard
UCC at The Villages, FL
August 20th, 2017

Genesis 45:1-15

Matthew 15:10-28

Joseph said to his brothers,

“Come closer to me,” and they moved closer.

He said,

“I’m your brother Joseph! The one you sold to Egypt.

Now, don’t be upset and don’t be angry with yourselves

that you sold me here. Actually, God sent me before you to save lives.

Genesis 45:4-5

Let us pray... O God,

Help us to recognize our kinship with one another – that we are all family

and that to overcome racism and all forms of ethnic and gender hatred,

may we be able to say to one another, and believe that, “I am you...”

Amen

Perhaps you have heard of the musical,

“Joseph & The Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.”

It is the story about Joseph who was one of the twelve sons of Jacob.

We can’t assume these days that everybody knows these stories –

though most *may* have heard of “Joseph & The Technicolor Dreamcoat”

they still may not know who Joseph is.

Here’s a summary:

Abraham’s son Isaac & Rebecca had two sons, Jacob and Esau.

Jacob who tricked his father into giving him his older brother’s inheritance

and finagled a fortune away from his wily uncle Laban,

but like the “prodigal son” returned to face his brother Esau,

who opted not to righteously kill for his treachery.

Now, it is general wisdom that a parent’s best revenge is when their child

finds out what it means to be a parent themselves –

Jacob was no exception!

Jacob had six sons and a daughter by Leah, two sons by Bilhah, two sons by Zilpah,

and finally two sons by Rachel – who were Joseph and Benjamin.

Joseph was his father’s favorite and gave him a special gift:

a beautiful coat of many colors – hence, the ‘Technicolor Dreamcoat’.

Joseph also had a gift from God: the ability to interpret dreams.

All of this did not sit well with his envious brothers, who decided to kill him.

But by the intervention at the last minute of the eldest brother, Reuben.

he was sold into slavery.

While in Egypt, his master’s wife, called Zuleikha in the Muslim folk tradition,

tried to seduce him, but he remains faithful to doing what is right,

and runs away from her.

Willard, p.2

She is a woman scorned and accuses Joseph of trying to molest her
so, he is imprisoned.

Ultimately, Joseph is freed – thanks to his ability to discern dreams,
and thus, earns the favor of Pharaoh himself
who entrusts Joseph as his chief administrator.

It is in this position of authority, that provides Joseph with the opportunity
to save his family along with the people of Egypt, from famine;
and in the process, reconciled with his brothers.

This is classic Girardian theology –
where a scapegoat returns forgiveness and love despite injustice
to ‘overcome evil with good’.

Again according to Rene Girard, imitation turns into desire
and then competition, spiraling into violence.

Our human inclination is to respond with more violence
by finding a scapegoat in order to assign – or shift, the blame.

The scapegoat is generally a group that can’t defend themselves
as they are publicly punished and suppressed.

This is how civilizations and empires get their start –
like the fratricide of Romulus killing Remus to found the Roman Empire.

The Book of Genesis could have likewise ended the way it began,
when Cain murdered Abel.

But instead, Joseph’s love for his brothers prevails,
and he forgives them – though not before he pulls an elaborate prank on them
to bring the youngest brother Benjamin to Egypt,
and eventually, their father and his household, too.

This is also Girardian, with forgiveness and love
offered in return to hate and aggression, breaking this vicious cycle.

So, Genesis closed with a happy ending for the ancestors of the Jewish people –
for the time being...

Throughout the Bible we see a tension between the people of Israel and...
just about everybody – even God !

Right before Jacob returns to meet Esau after years of estrangement,
he wrestles with a mysterious person in the night;
and after a split decision, the stranger gives Jacob a new name –
“Israel” which means, “Those Who Struggle With God”.

Well, that name still applies in our time – not only for a nation state,
but the spiritual descendants of Jacob in the Christian and Muslim
sides of this family of God’s children.

In Jesus’ time, we still see territorial lines drawn according to vestigial rivalries
as well as contemporary hatreds.

Willard, p.3

By the 1st Century, the Jews of Palestine were an oppressed people,
governed by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire
and some of their countrymen were in collusion with the Romans
as spiritual leaders and civic managers or tax collectors.

The Samaritans in their midst were considered to be heretics because they were
a mix of northern Hebrews and people conquered by the Assyrians –
and they were shunned by the Judean religious authorities.

The Jewish community itself was divided between Judeans in the south
and Galileans in the north – representing an historical distrust
from the time when the northerners broke away
to split the Kingdom into two factions after the death of King Solomon.

The non-Jewish people living in 1st Century Palestine
were the remnants of the ancient Philistines – who would become Palestinians.

The neighboring nations included:

Egypt to the south, which had a role in Jewish history
for good and ill.

The Decapolis – or the region of the Ten Cities, in the west,
mostly in what is now Jordan;

and Syro-Phoenicia to the north,
which was along the coast of today's Lebanon and part of Syria.

Though Syro-Phoenicia was Roman territory in Jesus' day,
the Jews remembered it as the regional capital of the Greeks
and the tyranny of Antiochus IV about 200 years earlier.

His persecutions were provoked by a failed Jewish uprising,
and he sought to crush the Jewish way of life and impose Greek culture.

Thousands were killed indiscriminately, sacred texts destroyed,
the Temple was looted and desecrated.

So, Jewish feelings about the Syro-Phoenicians were fresh;

They still felt a bitter, ethnic hatred that – according to today's Gospel lesson,
may have been shared by Jesus...

An earlier association of this region was with the Canaanites the original inhabitants
who opposed the Hebrews led by Joshua as they entered the 'Promised Land'.

Centuries later, the Canaanites reasserted themselves through Queen Jezebel
who was the wife of the corrupt Israelite, King Ahab.

When a Canaanite woman comes to Jesus –

who was called a Syro-Phoenician in the Gospel of Mark's version of this story,
she is desperate for him to cast out an evil spirit from her daughter.

But Jesus seems to dismiss her request,

even insulting her with an epithet describing her people as 'dogs'.

Willard, p.4

Now, the presence of his disciples in hearing range, suggests he was setting them up for a teaching point about *their* Galilean attitudes and prejudices.

But what if his disrespect towards this woman was still based on Jesus' own provincial beliefs? So, what would that mean?

Perhaps it simply means that Jesus was subject to being fully human, yet when confronted with the error of his ways,

he could change his mind – and do the right thing...

Which is what he did.

That's why we can't give up on family and friends with whom we disagree.

That Canaanite/Syro-Phoenician woman didn't let Jesus off the hook – and he changed.

That mysterious stranger didn't let Jacob off the hook

even though Jacob stubbornly clung to wanting his own way,

but who came away changed, too.

In the 1970s, the TV show, "All In The Family", parodied white bigotry in the form of a character named Archie Bunker.

Usually, the joke was on him as he was confounded by his guileless wife, his sensitive daughter, and his 'Meathead' son-in-law, to face that –

deep down inside, apart from his misguided logic and blustery words, compassion transcended affiliation.

When you know somebody, it makes a difference.

An amazing example of people we would expect to be stuck

in their mutually exclusive perspectives, have actually found common ground

in wanting to protect their city of Charleston, SC

from the same fate as Charlottesville, VA.

Last Wednesday, PBS Newshour featured an interview with two people from Charleston, who have widely divergent opinions:

a white secessionist – that is someone who wants SC to secede from the Union, named James Bessenger, and

a black nationalist named Johnathan "Shakem" Thrower.

They have: *agreed to what they're calling the Charleston Accord, which says though they may continue to be on opposite sides of an issue,*

they would have an open dialogue,

promote legal avenues for change,

work to prevent violence,

and collaborate for the public good when they could.

Actually, both men – who were about the same age and same stocky build,

looked like they came out of the same mold, just in different colors –

brothers from different mothers.

When you know somebody, it makes a difference...

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/secessionist-black-nationalist-pledge-peaceful-dialogue-charlotteville/>

Willard, p.5

We are all in danger of being infected by the anger and slurs,
innuendoes and outright contempt – that if we don't challenge that
inner dialogue, we could start parroting the script of other people's rage.
Instead, we have to be willing to put ourselves in the position
of others' point of view – without having to accept
the talking points of their arguments.

You just have to remember they are no more – and no less, human than you are.

We are all part of the same family of being human.

When you can say, "I am you", kind of like a formula, "I" equals "you",
then forgiveness and love are possible – like you hope it is possible for you, too.

Tonight, we will host a Prayer Vigil of Conscience as an interfaith gathering
for clergy and lay ministers and others to reflect upon our society,
speak out against the hatred of Nazi and KKK – inspired groups,
and speak up for love and justice that can yet make for
a beloved community that is possible.

My hope is that it will be a beginning for an ongoing dialogue about how
black, white, brown, yellow, red, Jew, Christian, Muslim, LGBTQ people,
women & men are "all in the (same) family"
and can work together to *overcome evil with good*.

Amen

Our lesson from Genesis 45:1-15 gives us a happy ending to the story of Joseph whose jealous brothers sold him into slavery only to their brother's faith rewarded by God's good purpose...

- 45:1 Joseph could no longer control himself in front of all his attendants, so he declared,
“Everyone, leave now!”
So no one stayed with him when he revealed his identity to his brothers.
- 2 He wept so loudly that the Egyptians and Pharaoh's household heard him.
3 Joseph said to his brothers,
“I'm Joseph! Is my father really still alive?”
His brothers couldn't respond because they were terrified before him.
- 4 Joseph said to his brothers,
“Come closer to me,” and they moved closer.
He said,
“I'm your brother Joseph!
The one you sold to Egypt.
- 5 Now, don't be upset and don't be angry with yourselves that you sold me here.
Actually, God sent me before you to save lives.
- 6 We've already had two years of famine in the land, and there are five years left without planting or harvesting.
- 7 God sent me before you to make sure you'd survive and to rescue your lives in this amazing way.
- 8 You didn't send me here; it was God who made me a father to Pharaoh, master of his entire household, and ruler of the whole land of Egypt.
- 9 “Hurry! Go back to your father. Tell him this is what your son Joseph says: ‘God has made me master of all of Egypt. Come down to me. Don't delay.
- 10 You may live in the land of Goshen, so you will be near me, your children, your grandchildren, your flocks, your herds, and everyone with you.
- 11 I will support you there, so you, your household, and everyone with you won't starve, since the famine will still last five years.’
- 12 You and my brother Benjamin have seen with your own eyes that I'm speaking to you.
- 13 Tell my father about my power in Egypt and about everything you've seen. Hurry and bring my father down here.”
- 14 He threw his arms around his brother Benjamin's neck and wept, and Benjamin wept on his shoulder.
- 15 He kissed all of his brothers and wept, embracing them.
After that, his brothers were finally able to talk to him.

Let us be challenged and guided by these words...

Matthew 15:10-28

¹⁰ And [Jesus] called the people to him and said to them,

“Hear and understand: ¹¹ not what goes into the mouth defiles a man,
but what comes out of the mouth, this defiles a man.”

¹² Then the disciples came and said to him,

“Do you know that the Pharisees were offended
when they heard this saying?”

¹³ He answered,

“Every plant which my heavenly Father has not planted
will be rooted up.

¹⁴ Let them alone; they are blind guides.

And if a blind man leads a blind man, both will fall into a pit.”

¹⁵ But Peter said to him,

“Explain the parable to us.”

¹⁶ And he said,

“Are you also still without understanding?

¹⁷ Do you not see that whatever goes into the mouth passes into the stomach,
and so passes on?

¹⁸ But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart,
and this defiles a man.

¹⁹ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft,
false witness, slander.

²⁰ These are what defile a man;

but to eat with unwashed hands does not defile a man.”

²¹ And Jesus went away from there and withdrew to the district of Tyre and Sidon.

²² And behold, a Canaanite woman from that region came out and cried,

“Have mercy on me, O Lord, Son of David;
my daughter is severely possessed by a demon.”

²³ But he did not answer her a word. And his disciples came and begged him, saying,

“Send her away, for she is crying after us.”

²⁴ He answered,

“I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”

²⁵ But she came and knelt before him, saying,

“Lord, help me.”

²⁶ And he answered,

“It is not fair to take the children’s bread and throw it to the dogs.”

²⁷ She said,

“Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs
eat the crumbs that fall from their masters’ table.”

²⁸ Then Jesus answered her,

“O woman, great is your faith! Be it done for you as you desire.”
And her daughter was healed instantly.

Dominic Crossan asks the question why the Bible mentions no demon possession prior to the Gospels and Epistles:

“So where did all these demon-possessed people come from?”

Dr. Crossan suggests that this is a way of talking about the Roman occupation and that Jesus’ saving power of exorcism is figurative of the character of God’s power over and against such imperial ‘powers that be’.

In recent years, I have been fascinated by the connection that Martin Luther King, Jr. had with Gandhi. King drew some inspiration from Gandhi's success and Gandhi himself corresponded with Leo Tolstoy - a Christian anarchist who in turn was inspired by the nonviolent practices of American Mennonites - all of whom derive inspiration from Jesus' Sermon on The Mount. It is ironic that white Christian extremists will insist on The Ten Commandments to be publicly displayed, yet ignore the dynamic possibilities of The Sermon on The Mount.

Another dimension to my inquiry is the role of empire in conflict with true community. We have been dealing with empires for quite a while now. Theologians like Rene Girard and Walter Wink say that empires or civilization comes about through sanctified violence and are sustained through violence. Dominic Crossan says that there are alternatives in history for human community that works without having a 'boogey man' to blame or a permanent underclass to persecute or marginal population to exploit.

But Joseph said to them,

“Fear not, for am I in the place of God?”

*As for you, you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good,
to bring it about that many people should be kept alive,
as they are today.*

Genesis 45:19