

I Am Your Brother

As I mentioned last week, the Revised Common Lectionary gives surprisingly short shrift to the familiar story of Joseph. Perhaps those who devised the shared three-year journey through the Scriptures decided that the story was so well-known, it didn't need to be retold. But it does leave the preacher who wants to focus on the Genesis lectionary passages in a bit of a quandary: to assume that everyone will remember the story and blithely jump from chapter 37 to chapter 45 without a mention of the material in between or to take up time in the sermon to remind everyone of the story they may not have heard since childhood. I'm opting for the latter but I'm going to make it a quick review, so if you're thinking this might be a good opportunity for a nap, you may not get as far as REM sleep. Also, I'll be using this review to talk about one of the two themes that I'm most interested in this morning, so it really is worth staying awake, even if you remember Joseph's adventures perfectly.

That theme is one I mentioned in the conclusion of last week's sermon: Joseph's steadfast faith in Yahweh despite being the first of the patriarchs not to have a direct revelation of God. It's worth saying again that unlike Abraham, Isaac or Jacob, Joseph never heard God's voice speaking to him, never encountered the presence of God disguised as a man or seen in a dream. Like most of us, I would imagine, Joseph's knowledge of God was only based on his faith in God, rather than on a sensory experience of God. Throughout the story of Joseph, both the narrator of Genesis and Joseph himself attribute the unlikely success that Joseph encounters at nearly every turn to Yahweh. You will remember that we left Joseph at the end of chapter 37 last week being taken off as a slave to be sold in Egypt. When his story resumes in chapter 39 after a brief excursus – chapter 38 concerns the misadventures of his brother Judah's family – we find that Joseph has been purchased by Potiphar, the captain of the guard of Pharaoh. The Genesis narrative continues: "The Lord was with Joseph, and he became a successful man; he was in the house of his Egyptian master. His master saw that the Lord was with him, and that the Lord caused all that he did to prosper in his hands. So Joseph found favor in his sight and attended him; he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had. From the time that he made him overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field."

But even in adversity, we see Joseph's reliance and focus on Yahweh. His success in Potiphar's house is derailed by the infamous incident with Potiphar's wife. The mistress of the house is what might today be called a "cougar;" she makes advances on the much younger Joseph which he refuses, citing his master's trust in him and asking, "How then could I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?" Having been twice rebuffed, she accuses the young man of attempted rape and he is thrown into prison, yet another pit. Nevertheless, Genesis tells us, "...the Lord was with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailer. The chief jailer committed to Joseph's care all the prisoners who were in the prison, and whatever was done there, he was the one who did it. The chief jailer paid no heed to anything that was in Joseph's care, because the Lord was with him; and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper."

In his imprisonment, Joseph is introduced to two servants of Pharaoh who have fallen into disfavor, Pharaoh's cupbearer and his baker. When they complain of having dreams they cannot understand, Joseph interprets them for them, giving credit to God. And so, when Pharaoh

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himself has troubling dreams two years later, the cupbearer, back in his master's good graces, recommends Joseph as a seer. Called before the monarch, Joseph boldly proclaims, "It is not I; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer," then interprets the famous dreams of the seven good years and seven years of famine. Pharaoh is so impressed that he makes the young man his second-in-command, tasking him with preparing the land for the famine by stockpiling grain, just as Joseph has suggested. And so it is that the years of famine find Joseph as the second most powerful man in Egypt, married to the daughter of an Egyptian high-priest but still giving praise to the God of his fathers: "Joseph named (his) firstborn (son) Manasseh, "For," he said, "God has made me forget all my hardship and all my father's house." The second he named Ephraim, "For God has made me fruitful in the land of my misfortunes.""

If the story of Joseph ended there, it would still be a potent reminder to us that God can use even the bitter things in our lives to bring grace to us and to those around us. Because Joseph is in Egypt, thanks to the jealousy of his brothers, and in prison, thanks to the lust and lies of a faithless woman, he is put in a position, thanks to his continued faith in God, to impress all those he comes in contact with, even to Pharaoh himself. Because he has Pharaoh's favor, he is able to save not only the people of Egypt but also people from the surrounding countries, including his own family, from famine. In this we see the beginning of the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." The late John Claypool wrote a sermon on this aspect of the Joseph story, God's blessings coming in the midst of apparent defeat, which he called "The Worse Things are Never the Last Things." It reminded me of something Connie has often told me: "It'll all be OK in the end; if it's not OK, it's not the end." That, my friends, is good theology.

But Joseph's story, as we know, does not end there. Among those who come to the granaries of Egypt during the famine are the ten eldest sons of Israel. Joseph sees and recognizes them but they do not recognize him. Joseph does not know if they are still the same hateful, selfish men who plotted against his life or if time has improved them, so he puts them to a series of tests. First, he accuses them of being spies and imprisons them for three days, releasing them only on the promise that they will produce the youngest brother they have told him about. He is curious, perhaps to see how they treat Rachel's youngest son, who would have likely taken his place as Jacob's favorite. Because the brothers do not know that this Egyptian potentate speaks Hebrew, he easily overhears their remorse over the way they had treated their presumably-dead brother Joseph and he is moved to private tears. As a further test, he places the silver with which they paid for their grain back in their bags and sends them home, keeping Simeon as a hostage.

When they return with Benjamin, very much against the wishes of Jacob, Joseph has to hide his emotions from them again. It is looking very much as if his brothers have indeed matured into honest, God-fearing men. But he has one more test for them. When the eleven leave this time with their purchased grain, he has all their silver put back in their bags, both the payment for the current purchase and the silver which they had returned to him from the last time, assuming there had been an error. He also has his own silver cup put in Benjamin's bag. When they are accused of theft and forced to return by Joseph's guards, the cup is found and the brothers are horrified.

It is here that one of the most interesting turns in the saga comes. It was Leah's son, Judah, as you may remember, who had masterminded the sale of Joseph into slavery, the same Judah who

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later reacted callously to the deaths of his own sons and was ready to sentence Tamar to death without a hearing. But Judah has changed over the years. He has taken responsibility for Benjamin's safety in order to convince Jacob to let the boy travel to Egypt at all and now, the brother who was most responsible for selling one of Rachel's sons into slavery offers himself so that the other favored brother may go home to their father. Having been a participant in causing Jacob's overwhelming grief at the supposed death of Joseph, he begs now for the Egyptian vizier not to cause his aged father yet more grief. Judah has been transformed from a character who exhibits only the worst failings of his family, one of the erstwhile killers of the Dream, to one who is a worthy ancestor for the Israelite who will bring the Dream to its fulfillment, Jesus of Nazareth.

That is where our scripture for the morning picks up, with the revelation of Joseph and the tearful reunion between the brothers. All of Joseph's concerns have been answered – his brothers are now men who repent of their actions against him, who cherish their youngest brother and are faithful in their regard for their father. Although Joseph does not allow them to forget what they have done – “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt” – he ameliorates their guilt by pointing to God's gracious redemption of their betrayal – “do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life.” There is forgiveness for them here and restoration of relationship. “I am your brother,” he says, and there are hugs with tears and the brothers talk together, a complete healing of the relationship ruptured all the way back at the beginning of chapter 37 when, “they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

And so we see in the story of Joseph not only how God works with the faith of God's people to redeem even the most grievous human acts but also how those acts of God can bring together those who have been locked in bitter enmity. Joseph's forced exile has not only ended up saving the physical lives of the Children of Israel but has also created the circumstance in which the dysfunctional family dynamic could be made whole. Because of the deep division between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel caused by Jacob's favoritism, it is scarcely imaginable that the brothers and their offspring would have remained close following their father's death had the events of this story not unfolded as we have seen. The tribes would have been scattered and presumably swallowed up by the majority Canaanite culture. But in Goshen, they prosper and grow closely interknit thanks first to the benevolence of Joseph and later to the persecution of the Pharaoh who, in the words of Exodus, “knew not Joseph.” They begin to fulfill God's promise to Abraham that his descendents will be a great nation. And they become a family who can ignore old divisions and say to each other, “I am your brother. I am your sister.”

There are scholars who view the stories in Genesis that tell the family history of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as fictional. They believe that archaeological evidence points instead to several unconnected tribes of Semitic peoples who became allied in the land of Canaan at a much later date, perhaps under a strong leader named David, although some believe that he, too, was a fictional hero. But whether we give more credence to the Biblical account or to the speculation of these skeptical archaeologists, one point can be made from either viewpoint. Whatever the origin of the tribes of Israel and whenever they joined together, what brought them together was the worship of one God. Whether or not they were all related through the blood of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, they were certainly united in their faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

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Because of their unique monotheism, their belief in Yahweh as the One True God, members of the tribes of Judah and Manasseh, of Ephraim and Simeon, of Reuben and Benjamin, of Dan and Asher, can set aside family rivalries and say, "I am your sister. I am your brother."

There is another story in our lectionary this morning that tells of at least the beginning of the restoration of another ruptured family relationship. This is a family that has been sundered even longer than the brothers of Joseph. If we follow the Biblical account, this is a family divided since shortly after the time of Noah, for now we are dealing not only with the descendents of Abraham, who was from the line of Shem, but also with the descendents of Canaan, who was from the line of Ham. I am speaking of the story in Matthew 15 of Jesus and the Canaanite woman. Do you know it?

"Jesus... went away to the district of Tyre and Sidon. Just then a Canaanite woman from that region came out and started shouting, "Have mercy on me, Lord, Son of David; my daughter is tormented by a demon." But he did not answer her at all. And his disciples came and urged him, saying, "Send her away, for she keeps shouting after us." He answered, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly."

This story has troubled readers for centuries. Why would Jesus first ignore this woman and then give her such a harsh answer? Surely this is not consonant with the character of Jesus as a peacemaker, a healer, one who represents the love of God for all humankind? In choosing to go to the district of Tyre and Sidon, was he not expecting to have to deal with the Gentile inhabitants of the region, who far outnumbered the few Jews who lived in the area? I can't hope to resolve all those questions for everyone this morning but I will say that I do believe that Jesus knew he would be asked by the Gentiles there for healing and help, just as he was asked by people wherever he went for help. And I believe we can find the clue to Jesus' peculiar actions in the story we just considered. Just as Joseph tested his brothers to find out how they would react to adversity before he revealed himself to them, I believe that Jesus is testing this woman before he reveals himself to her. As Bruce Epperly of Lancaster Theological Seminary writes, "Jesus is testing her resolve. As twelve step wisdom says, "you've got to want it real bad!" And perhaps, as Epperly and others also suggest, Jesus is also testing his disciples, seeing if they will challenge his disregard of the woman and his reliance on popular racist separatism as a rationale before he "pulls the rug out from under them" and ministers to her need. Will the disciples come to the defense of a despised Gentile as Judah came to the defense of the younger son of the despised Rachel?

But whatever Jesus' motivations in this story, there is a more clear cut lesson for us in this story and it, too, goes hand in hand with the teaching of the story of Joseph. In her relentless petitioning of Jesus, the unnamed Canaanite mother is making a claim on him. Recognizing him as Lord and as Son of David, or Messiah, she is saying to him, in essence, "I recognize your authority and your place in my life. I am your sister." And in granting her the help she so stridently requests, Jesus is replying, "Yes, I have a duty to you. I am your brother."

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Just as the sons of Jacob in their time, just as Jews and Gentiles at the time of Egypt, today our world continues to be rent by tribal enmity. The world's latest hotspot is the nation of Georgia, where ethnic rivalries have burst into full fledged war. We have become all too familiar in recent years with the term "ethnic cleansing" and the use of that horrifying philosophy in wars in Europe and Africa; from the breakup of Yugoslavia to civil wars or actions in Rwanda and Burundi, Congo, Kenya, Sudan, Ethiopia and the ongoing tragedy of Darfur. Nor can we claim immunity from this sort of interracial strife in America as we recall the systematic exile and slaughter of our own native peoples and the tribal hatreds and fears that still fuel discrimination against African-Americans, unjust immigration policies, and dehumanizing treatment of so-called enemy combatants. Could any of these tragic marks of human brokenness stand if each of us would look at all other human beings and say, "I am your sister; I am your brother"?

The apostle Paul, speaking of Christ Jesus and his redeeming work to the Ephesians, wrote, "he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." To the church in Colossae, Paul wrote, "(In Christ) there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all." We must be ready to say to all the people of God's earth, both individually and collectively, "I am your brother; I am your sister." Whatever rivalries might divide us, be they differences in race, in gender, in orientation, in country of origin, in creed or philosophy, in political party or school allegiance, we must welcome each and every one as our beloved sibling and we must accept the responsibility of being our brother's and our sister's keeper. God is no respecter of persons and we are called to follow suit, to recognize no east or west, but to be a bridge of care, a meeting ground of hope and healing. We are called, my brothers and sisters, to take the love of Christ to all the world, to act as the table where all women and all men can find the bread and the wine of Christ's sacrificial love. It is up to us to help bring reality to the psalmist's vision, "What a goodly thing it is, when brothers and sisters live in harmony." May our Loving Creator so fill us with love and will and courage that each of our lives becomes an unquestionable standard for that love and harmony.