

# All in the Family

sermon digest

September 6, 2009

Genesis 50:15-21

larry dipboye

According to the story of beginnings (Genesis), Abraham's grandson Jacob cheated his twin brother Esau out of their father Isaac's birthright and blessing. Jacob's life was chaotic, a series of deals with relatives and constant fear of reprisals from Esau. After a wrestling match with a divine being at the River Jabbok, Jacob, "supplanter," was given a new name Israel, "man of God." (Gen 32:28) Jacob had twelve sons: six by Leah, four by two servant girls, and Joseph and Benjamin by the love of his life Rachel. Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. Thus the Twelve Tribes of Israel came from Jacob's twelve sons. Joseph is the person through whom the family arrived in Egypt. There the descendants of the man Israel became the nation Israel.

Among other character defects, Jacob was guilty of favoritism. His favorite son Joseph was the first son of his favorite wife Rachel. Joseph was a spoiled-rotten kid, who enjoyed acting out his place of privilege and parading his long-sleeved robe, a special gift from Dad, before his brothers. Jacob seemed to recognize that Joseph, a dreamer and interpreter of dreams, had a special gift from God. Even Jacob was offended when Joseph dreamed of becoming lord over his family. The dream pushed the older brothers over the edge of resentment into hatred, and they conspired to kill the boy. However, Reuben talked them into abandoning Joseph in a pit. He planned to rescue Joseph later, but a band of nomads came along. The sons of Jacob sold their seventeen-year-old brother to Midianite nomads, stained his special robe with goat's blood, and told their father that he was killed by wild animals.

Remember, this is the first family of the Jews, the heirs of the Abraham covenant, the chosen race, the elect people. By anyone's measure this is a dysfunctional family. It would seem that the writers of Genesis failed to edit properly. Family skeletons are usually better left in closets, especially in patriotic literature. But this thirteen chapter, well-written narrative is more than another entertaining soap opera. Gerhard von Rad associated the story with the early Jewish Monarchy and the Wisdom school around 1,000 BCE. Joseph is a model of Jewish royalty demonstrating strength of character and moral integrity overcoming numerous obstacles even within his own family. This warts-and-all story moves through a well-developed plot to a single lesson of proverbial wisdom.

Joseph was transported to Egypt and sold to Potiphar an Egyptian official. His honesty, diligence, and dream interpretation served him well. Joseph gained Potiphar's esteem to become manager of the house, but Potiphar's wife was attracted to the handsome young man and attempted to seduce him. When he refused her advances, she accused him of assault, and Joseph was sent to prison. Like his enslavement, imprisonment was another devastating event that should have ended the story, but even in prison the gifted young man proved to be a leader. His ability to read dreams brought him to the attention of the Pharaoh. Only Joseph was able to read Pharaoh's dream as a forecast of seven years of abundance followed by a seven-year famine. In addition, Joseph suggested a plan to survive the famine. Pharaoh then elevated this thirty-year-old foreigner to second in command over all of Egypt to manage the national food supply.

The arrival of famine brings the story back home to Joseph's family. Father Jacob learns that the Egyptians have a store of food and sends all but Benjamin, the youngest son, to buy food. Joseph recognizes his brothers, but they do not know him. He is finally in the ideal position for ultimate revenge and exercises authority to threaten his brothers bringing them to their knees. Finally, Joseph identified himself to his brothers, assured them of his good will toward his family, and asked to see his father Jacob. Pharaoh welcomed the family of Joseph into Egypt, and it seemed that the whole purpose of this story was to explain how the family of Jacob ended up in Egypt and to prepare for the next story, the Exodus. However, the Joseph story has its own focus that emerges in the final verses.

***The dysfunctional family stands in contrast with the providence of God.*** "All in the Family" was a favorite TV show that ran from 1971-1979. Archie Bunker, the labor-class bigot was the unquestioned star of the show with his outlandish political views and blind social prejudice. His sweet wife Edith, "the dingbat," was the naive heroine always committed to keeping peace in the family. The household was complicated by the hippie liberalism of daughter Gloria and her husband Michael, "the meathead." We all laughed at the caricatures of people we knew and people we were, but no one wanted to live like the Bunkers. Apart from entertainment, the only purpose that I could glean from the show was how not to behave. Without question, the early stories of the Patriarchal families of Israel were the Bunkers in robes.

At the death of Jacob, the guilty brothers begin to speculate that Joseph was now free to get revenge, so they approached Joseph with a concocted will from their father that Joseph should forgive his brothers. They then added their own plea for mercy. For a second time in the story, Joseph wept over his brothers and again explained the irony of events as the wisdom of God: *"Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today."*

Here lies the moral of the story of Joseph and the justification for exposing the dirty linens in the family of

Jacob. In the mystery of providence, God is able to use evil people and events to achieve an ultimate good. Joseph's word to his brothers, the wisdom of his story, is that their evil thoughts and deeds were the building blocks that saved the family. He stops short of saying, "Ah, shucks, it's all OK. Your evil acts were not really all that mean!" Joseph never revises the memory of being threatened with death, dumped in a pit, and sold to nomads as a "good thing." He does not recharacterize sibling hatred as the intention of God. Joseph's theology envisions a God beyond the reaches of our memory or our evil intentions. The God of Covenant will not be thwarted. Thus, the evil deeds of his brothers were woven into the fabric of a new beginning for Israel by the mysterious Lord over history.

However, Exodus begins another family crisis with (1:8), "now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph." Then began the enslavement of the Israelites and their cruel treatment at the hands of Egyptians. Then came Moses, a new savior to lead God's people home, but the story never seems to end. The providence of salvation is never closed within the pages of the Old Testament. Just as Joseph went from pit, to slavery, to prestige, to prison, and to authority over all Egypt, the story of the people Israel is a roller-coaster ride of ups and downs, and God's providence never seems to be resolved as the final outcome of the Jewish venture. I don't hear Jews saying today that Hitler did a good thing for the Jews with his death camps and gas chambers, although the slaughter of six million Jews led to the resettlement of Palestine and today's peace and prosperity.

Given the wisdom of Israel that looks beyond evil men and events to the providence of God, every keen observer must recognize with Job that sometimes bad things happen to good people with no rescue in sight. Whatever was accomplished in the life of Joseph for the People of God was done through the commitment and integrity of the man. We can never let up on the responsibility on our shoulders to exercise our gifts to bring to the world God is making peace and justice.

***The family bond of love must take precedence over all our feelings of fear, resentment, and retaliation.*** The word here for younger brothers is that forgiveness is greater than revenge. The word for elder bullies is that we never know where the river of life is going to lead. Most younger brothers grow up to remember where they have been, and eventually all in the family have to exercise adult responsibility in remembering childish meanness. The ultimate purpose of God in our family bonds is reconciliation. That means peace on all sides. A lopsided feature in the Joseph story always bothers me. Jacob is at fault in loving one child over the others, not to speak of his choice of favorites among wives. Joseph is obviously at fault in taunting his brothers. But the responsibility for apology falls only on the older brothers. If the family is to heal, the fault must be confessed from all sides. Reconciliation flows from both sides of conflict.

A story of Jesus in Luke seems to reflect his knowledge of the Joseph story. In the story of Jesus the younger brother is the villain. He leaves home willingly and with his inheritance in hand. When he crashes and burns in a pig sty, having spent all of his money, he decides to come back home to the family he remembers as always having enough. To his surprise, the one he wronged the most, his father, is the one who forgives. It is the older brother who cannot find peace. I think that Jesus knew enough about family out of his own experience to know that all families are dysfunctional to some extent and that the only way to be family is to embrace with forgiveness. That is true not only of Israel, but of the global family to which we all belong.