

Philadelphia—Brother Love

sermon digest

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Genesis 37:26-35; 50:15-21

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As we were preparing to move to Oak Ridge in 1988, Louisville was audience to a family feud. The Bingham family was hands down the most powerful and the most famous family in town. Heir to a fortune, Barry Bingham, Sr., had expanded family wealth to a position of dominance and national respect in the communications industry of the region. The Bingham name was known for generous support of charitable causes, the arts, and community service. The family had survived with some dignity and grace the accidental deaths of two sons. But behind the public scene, a private family war was brewing. The family patriarch appointed his surviving son Barry, Jr., as Editor of *The Courier Journal* newspaper and gave his daughters positions on the Board. As the father approached the end of life, Barry, Jr., maneuvered to rid the Board of his sisters. Family privacy was compromised by legal suits and competing interviews granted by father, son, and daughter. Finally the dying man attempted to end the conflict by liquidating all of his holdings. He died in August, 1988, humiliated by the public scandal and legal battles among his children that had played out in his final months of life. At his death, three books on the Bingham family were rushed to print.

Nothing sells like a family feud. Perhaps that is the rationale behind the embarrassing events in the Hebrew Patriarchs. The fourth generation of Abraham's family, Joseph is the favorite son of his father Jacob/Israel; but he is also the favorite character in the story of Jewish origins in Genesis. Gerhard von Rad (*God at Work in Israel*, p. 20) notes that most of the narratives in Genesis run twenty to thirty verses in length. The Joseph story occupies 392 verses in a novel that has come down to us as an integrated whole. Like the stories of Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and Esau, the Joseph story is not the kind of stuff most families want to put in the family album for posterity.

The family feud actually began with the love story of Jacob and Rachel. It was love at first sight when Uncle Laban's daughter Rachel led her flock of sheep to the well where Jacob was camped. Jacob fell all over himself to uncover the well for Rachel. He kissed her and wept aloud, then worked out a deal with Laban to work seven years Rachel's hand in marriage. At the end of the deal, Laban substituted Rachel's older sister Leah; and Jacob had to work another seven years for Rachel. After six sons from Leah and several from concubines, Rachel finally conceived, and Joseph was born. Jacob returned to Canaan, and on the way Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin. In deep grief at the loss of his beloved Rachel, Jacob set his affection on her two sons favoring the older Joseph above all of Leah's sons.

It seems that Jacob suffered from a common problem among aging Patriarchs—senility . He made no pretense of recognizing the precedence of Leah's sons. He blatantly favored Joseph to the point of giving him a special coat, flaunting the favoritism before the older brothers, stirring anger and resentment. In addition to the coat, Jacob sent Joseph, perceived as a child of leisure, to check on the work of his brothers. The brothers acted out their anger with a plot to reenact the Cain-Able story of brother killing their brother. The wiser heads of Reuben and Judah prevailed, and Joseph was sold into slavery. The brothers lied to their father, claiming that Joseph had been mauled by a wild animal, then carried the guilt of their secret into their own families.

Meanwhile Joseph the dreamer and interpreter of dreams arrived in Egypt. Through his wonderful insight into dreams, he rose to a high government office in the court of the pharaoh. The irony of a drought brought his brothers to Egypt to beg for food, and the tables were turned. Now in the place of complete control and the power of life and death, Joseph wept at the sight of his younger brother Benjamin and played games of cat and mouse with the older brothers. Finally he revealed his identity, and the entire family of Jacob moved to Egypt. The continued tension between Joseph and his brothers became evident at the death of the Patriarch Jacob. Assuming that Joseph would get his revenge after the death of their father, the brothers pled for mercy and offered themselves as slaves to Joseph. To be fair to the older brothers, much of the tension in Jacob's family was created by Jacob's favoritism as well as Joseph's childish arrogance. Although none of that is clearly acknowledged, it seems that the sibling bond proved greater than the family secret, and the book of Genesis ends in Philadelphia, not the city, but the "brother love" for which the city was named.

The love of family can also be the source of bitter hatred. The name for the city, Philadelphia,

was formed by two Greek words, *philos* (love) and *adelphos* (brother). The ancient Philadelphia named in Revelation 3:7 was on the border joining three provinces, stationed and named with the deliberate intention of bringing three cultures together in “brother love.” the name was significant. Many border cities of the time were armed fortresses designed to shut out and resist the aliens on the other side of the line.

The Quaker founder of Pennsylvania, William Penn borrowed the biblical name for his city with the intention of forming a place of peace and community. Penn had suffered religious persecution in England. Unlike his Puritan neighbors, his colony welcomed people from other religious groups and offered friendship to Native Americans. Although Penn was granted the land by King Charles II, Penn paid the native tribes for the right to settle there. From the beginning Pennsylvania rejected human slavery, and it became a place where free Africans could live in peace. Before 1800, the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Zion Church, the first black Christian church in America, was founded there. Pennsylvania was prominent in the underground railroad, offering refuge for escaped and freed slaves.

But names do not determine behavior. In the twentieth century Philadelphia became known for political corruption and scandal. In 1919, Philadelphia was one of thirty-six major cities in the US to experience major race riots—not exactly what Penn envisioned in his beloved community of brother love. But attention to global history reveals the trend. People who live close to one another, like in a family, are much more likely to come into conflict than total strangers who never have to share space, coats, or parents.

The issue between the siblings in the Bingham family was the normal stuff that tends to destroy families—competition for parental favor, jealousy and resentment of privilege, and finally conflict over position and power. The irony of public embarrassment for the family was the half-century of family commitment to an industry that values the public’s right to know. If you know anything at all about family life, you know that the dynamics at work in the Bingham family are somewhat normal. Brothers and sisters are more than friends. The space and parents shared in the developing years of life create bonds to one another that compare only to the bond of marriage, and the same proximity to one another can set the stage for mutual self-destruction. The difference between the Bingham family and the rest of us is simple. Most of us do not make the newspapers or attract book writers because our families lack power and wealth. We might also note that power and wealth provide not only the context but the source of family feuds.

Family tension is basic to the popularity of the parable of Jesus about the prodigal son, the forgiving father, and the resentful elder brother. I suspect that sibling conflict is a big part of our fascination with the entire story of Israel. We are often reminded these days that the Mideast conflict, now in global proportions, began with resentment in Abraham’s household between Sarah and Hagar projected on their sons Ishmael and Isaac. The family feud continued in subsequent generations. The story of Joseph and his brothers is really a continuation of the family scandal of Jacob and Esau. It seems that family life may always contain something of a strange love-hate emotion.

But we cannot exist without family. Everyone’s essential identity is wrapped up in the family system. To be cut off from family is to be cut off from life. Yet, the family story is always the story of struggle, not only with the threat from outside, but from the threat within. Real families at the root of the biblical story are works in progress with at least as much reason for embarrassment as for pride. You have to keep in sight that the story of Joseph is the family scandal behind the Twelve Tribes of Israel, and you might even find the reflection in the mirror of your own experience.

The grace of God flows through dark valleys . The Joseph story is lauded as the best literary product of Genesis, far above the other stories of the Patriarchs. Edwin Good (*Irony in the Old Testament*, p. 106) calls the Joseph story “the irony of Providence”; Joseph finds in the evil deed of his brothers a means to save the family and serve the purpose of God. The climax is in the interpretation of divine purpose: “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.” Joseph’s clean sweep that tends to justify attempted murder, lying and cheating in the family is often stated in the proverb, “all’s well that ends well.”

Like the rest of Genesis, the Joseph story is edited from a variety of sources with some theological

diversity. Joseph's word of forgiveness is not the whole story. He certainly did not sweep the whole event away as if it were nothing, and he gave no indication of forgetting what his brothers did. But he finds the grace of forgiveness in the judgment that God is able to bring good out of evil.

All along, Joseph is portrayed as a dreamer. He seems to live in a fantasy world of his own imagination, yet he rightly determines that justice is served through forgiveness rather than revenge. I cannot buy the simplistic doctrine of election that blames God for the bad things that happen even when the story ends well. But I do believe in the kind of providence that credits the grace of God for leading us through the dark valley's of life.

In *The Different Drum*, Scott Peck claims Maundy Thursday as the most important day of the Christian calendar. He passes on Easter and Christmas in favor of the revolution in relationship that occurred when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples and gave new meaning to the bread and the cup of the Passover. "Here this man already on top—who was rabbi, teacher, master—suddenly got down on the bottom and began to wash the feet of his followers. In that one act Jesus symbolically overturned the whole social order." Then Peck cites Keith Miller's book *The Scent of Love* to note that the successful evangelism of the early church was not in miracles performed or great organizational ability of the institutional church. The pagan world was attracted to a community of inordinate compassion and love for one another. The world followed the scent of love into the gospel of Christ.

John wrote "God is love." The scent of God's love is the power that guides us through the events of our lives that threaten to destroy.