

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

9th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C

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Text: Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

Title: We Live; We Love: Betrayal

(Play video clip “Dysfunctional families”.)

A couple of the questions asked of these folks I am particularly interested in:

1. Did your parents have a favorite?

“Yeah, totally cause I was the youngest and the cutest out of everyone,” said one whose name could be Joseph.

“...whatever she did was fine!” one woman said of her sister.

2. Do you have unresolved issues with your family?

Two of them wouldn't talk about it.

Families come in all shapes sizes, colors and configurations these days. They are complex and many are deeply dysfunctional, leaving members struggling throughout their lives to seek some kind of resolution for the pain experienced there.

Over the last couple of years participating in the clergy clinic in family emotional process with the Lombard Mennonite Peace Center, it has become abundantly clear to me that even the best of families have dysfunction. It's just a matter of degree.

Most of us, I expect, can look at our family tree and find some pain, some disappointment, some hurt. It might involve a parent or grandparent who experienced some trauma themselves and then struggled to deal with their experience as they raise their own children. It might be siblings who just cannot get along and parenting that is less than perfect in handling the complexities of rivalries and such. Most of us have experienced dysfunction ourselves or know of those who have. While families are the groups in which our formative years take shape, they are not all whole, healthy and filled with perfectly faithful people who always do the right thing. What are we then to make of families as people of faith?

Well, if you were to look to the Bible for models of healthy families, Jacob the patriarch, would not be a model father. He has a son, the youngest, on whom he showers his affections. He loves Joseph because he is the “son of his old age.” Some might have called him Jacob and

Rachel's "oops baby". These are the children of people who have entered or are nearing retirement. They weren't planned.

I'll never forget one of my pastoral care professors in seminary talk about Matthew, their youngest son. All of their other children were grown and out on their own. Ann and Paul were planning their retirement and it had nothing to do with raising a child, but then it happened. Ann was pregnant. Paul—who was a man I admired for his willingness to be vulnerable with his students—said that he was devastated. He didn't want another child at this point in their lives. Thought about and talked about abortion as an option, but in the end they decided that wasn't the way and Matthew was born. Paul said that as he looked back on that decision, it was such a blessing, such a blessing to have Matthew in their lives. In spite of the fact that Matthew's birth meant Paul and Ann would be working longer than they anticipated, he brought more joy to this aging couple than they could have imagined, and my wise teacher shared how grateful he was to have Matthew in his life.

The scriptures do not tell us whether Joseph was planned or not, just that he was Jacob's favorite son, and Jacob was not particularly wise in how he expressed that favoritism. It became abundantly clear to Joseph's brothers that he was a daddy's boy, which is odd given that Jacob was a momma's boy and his brother Esau was the daddy's boy. You might think that Jacob would have learned from his own experience that unequal attachment to one child over the other made for difficulties in the family. His own experience with his father Isaac may have left him wanting. He saw what his brother, Esau, had with his father. Jacob used deception in order to receive his brother's blessing from his father because he wanted it so badly which caused all kinds of havoc and hard feelings in the family, so much so that Jacob had to leave. Was Jacob now trying to give his youngest son the kind of love he craved from his own father, Isaac? These are the kinds of patterns that develop in families through the generations.

Because Jacob wasn't particularly effective in loving his children in ways that communicated valuing each of them for who they were, he showed a clear and unabashed favoritism for Joseph. He bought him that famous robe. The Hebrew isn't clear about whether it was a coat of many colors or a coat with long sleeves but whatever the details were, the robe made Joseph stand out. The robe given to him by his father singled him out. All he had to do was enter the room, like a groom entering the room in his new tux, and everyone knew this guy was favored.

But it wasn't just his father's favoritism that set Joseph up. It was his dreams that sealed the deal. He had these dreams that he shared with abandon. He had two dreams both of which predicted that his family would be bowing down to him, serving him. Talk about dysfunction. Can you imagine one of your siblings sharing such a dream with you? "Someday you will be serving me. You will be bowing down to me." Apparently Joseph had no clue about how sharing the dreams would play with his family. Maybe he was just totally naïve and just didn't see it or maybe he really was an arrogant, spoiled brat. Either way the damage to the relationship with his family was the same.

It wasn't just the dreams or the coat. There's more. Joseph was the family snitch, too. He apparently played the role of Dad's spy. A good one he was. He apparently didn't hesitate to tell his father when his brother's weren't behaving appropriately.

Joseph, then, became a target for his brothers' anger. He had this coat. He had his dreams and he was their father's spy who would sell them out to Jacob in a heartbeat. Nobody likes a tattler, and so they hated him.

Now you might think that Jacob would have called a time out in all of this and had a

family conversation about the deep divisions in the family. You might think that the brothers could have called a family conference and cleared the air about their concerns. You would think that some healthy communication could have taken place before things went this far. Jacob could have taken each of his boys out individually for some coffee or a falafel lunch in order to communicate his affection for each of them so they could experience some of the attachment that Joseph experienced with Jacob. He could have taken the time to build a relationship with each son in order to communicate his affection for them. You would think that Jacob would have learned from his own family experience that favoritism left unchecked creates division in families. He experienced it as a child in his own family. But family systems are complex, and it's not easy to change them when one is a part of them. One of our teachers of the family systems theory through the Mennonite Peace Center used the analogy that trying to see how your own family system works is like a fish trying to see the water. It's not easy, which is why having a trained therapist walk with you is sometimes needed, because sometimes we just can't see the problems let alone the solutions.

Jacob clearly doesn't see it and so he doesn't act before things get out of hand. Now the brothers' hatred of Joseph was deep. It was so strong that they couldn't even address him with the common greeting: "Shalom" or "Peace". Have you ever been so angry with a sibling that you couldn't speak to him or her? It was so strong that when Jacob sent Joseph on a mission to spy on his brothers again as they tended sheep 50 miles or so from home, they decided it was time to deal with this spoiled, arrogant brat. It was time to silence him and his dreams.

So a plot was hatched. As the fire crackled in the wilderness and the smoke rose to the clouds as their evening meal was roasting over the fire, they saw the young, brash, teenager himself off in the distance. He was unmistakable. Like Liberace walking on a stage, his look was unmistakable. That coat, after all! That overconfident gate! It was Joseph!

Seeing him marching toward them, all they could think about was his coat, his dreams, his spying which he was no doubt sent to do this time around, too. All they could think about was him and their father who loved him more than any of them. And so when the plot was hatched to kill him, how it might affect Jacob did not even deter them because they weren't happy with Jacob either. "Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams."

Yet, there was an older brother. Reuben restrained them and convinced them not to kill Joseph but to throw him into one of the deep cisterns used to hold water in barren places. So as Joseph approached their camp, with their dinner still roasting over the fire, they circled him like a pack of wolves their prey. They drew the circle tighter around Joseph who had to expect this wasn't good. Finally one of them grabs the teenager, holding his arms behind his back as the others rip that stupid coat from his body. The dust of their feet creating a cloud around the group as they struggle to take down their brother. There are shouts and grunts and "What are you doing?" from Joseph. Finally it all ends in silence as Joseph is thrown in the dry pit. The dust from the struggle and his descent hang in the air as he sits there in his loin cloth, betrayed by his own flesh and blood.

The brothers go back to their campfire and their dinner. As they enjoy their meal of roasted lamb and the restraining voice of the eldest brother Reuben is lost to a trip to the nearest hiding place to take care of personal needs, a caravan approaches. An impetuous Judah tosses a bone into the fire after picking it clean and tells his brothers, "If we kill him and cover it up, we

don't really gain anything. Why don't we make a few dollars and just sell him to these traders?"

So these betrayers throw a rope down to Joseph and haul him out of the pit, tie his hands and negotiate a price with the lead man of the caravan who is headed to Egypt to sell his merchandise. Joseph, a healthy, strong 17 year old would be added to his inventory list and would fetch a pretty penny in the slave market. Off they go down the dusty road to Egypt. Joseph tied to a camel walks alongside the long line of camels and gear. He's gone. He and his dreams and his spying are gone. All they have left of him is the coat.

When Reuben is finished, on his way back to the campfire and dinner, he decides to check on Joseph, thinking that somehow he'll need to find a way to get the boy out when his brother's aren't around. Apparently, there is something in Reuben that recognizes that while he has no affection for his arrogant little brother, killing him wasn't the right thing to do either. But, of course, he finds the pit empty.

Panicking he runs to the campfire circle of brothers. He is so upset that he rips his shirt off and screams at them, "What am I supposed to do now? Don't you get it that I'm the oldest and will take the heat for this?"

Well, no, as often happens in families, they didn't get it. All they could feel was their anger and hatred for Joseph. That they did get. That they did express and act out. The problem of Joseph they thought was now dealt with. Of course, it wasn't quite that clean ending they might have hoped for. Now, they have to hatch another plot, a plot to deceive Jacob who himself was a deceiver. This is reminiscent of the idea of multigenerational dysfunction mentioned in the book of Numbers in which God talks "...about visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children to the third and the fourth generation" (Numbers 14:18). Or maybe it's like the old sayings: "The chickens come home to roost"; or "The apple doesn't fall far from the tree"; or "What goes around comes around." However we think about it, deception is part of Jacob's family system and he in his old age receives what he dished out to his brother and his father early in his life. His sons now deceive him when they bring the torn, blood soaked robe of his favorite son. They stand there lying to their father as he lied to his father and tell him, "Here. This is what we found." And they allow Jacob to come to his own conclusion, which sends the man to his knees in sorrow and grief, as the loss of anyone's child naturally does.

In all of this, God is hardly mentioned in this story of Joseph. In all of this pain where there is hatred and lying and deception and betrayal, God doesn't even get a mention in this part of this family's story. Though God may not be mentioned here, it does not mean that God is absent. IN fact, God is present in profound ways that will be revealed in the continuation of this story. God is assumed to be present all along. And maybe what we are supposed to learn from this story of an incredible lack of trust in this family of God--so much so that a young man is betrayed, is that when we experience these kinds of relationships in our own families, in our own lives, God will pull us through. God is so profoundly present that even when there is this kind of brokenness, God can do something redeeming and life-giving with it.

Like Jacob's family, sometimes we hurt each other too. Sometimes we are even betrayed by those we love, and it hurts. Families can be messy. Jacob's family was certainly no exception. It is not a model for the ideal family, but **God specializes in bringing meaning to the messes.** God doesn't abandon us to the messes we inherit, participate in or pass on. Rather, God stays with us, uses us, redeems us in ways we may not even be aware. So take heart if your family sounds more like Jacob's than Ozzy and Harriet's. God can make something of all of us, even when we hurt.