

“SOME THINGS NEVER CHANGE”

Genesis 45:1-15; Matthew 15:10-28

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They are stories of promise and passion, of love and lust, and hard work and betrayal; they are stories of faith and courage, arrogance, fear, and duplicity. They are the stories of the book of Genesis, the book in our sacred scripture that is about beginnings: the beginnings of the world, the beginnings of humanity, the beginnings of the people of God.

This morning’s scripture is a small piece of one of those stories, the story of Joseph, who is one of my favorite characters in the Bible. Let me summarize for you what Genesis tells us about Joseph, one of the great patriarchs of our faith. We meet Joseph when he is seventeen. He is introduced to us as a young man who tattles on his step-brothers. Nice. Then we learn he is his father’s favorite of 11 sons, that his father had a beautiful coat made for him because his father loved him so much and that really made his brothers—think of this—ten older brothers angry. Now Joseph, we find out, is not only a spoiled tattler; he also has the emotional intelligence of a gnat. He’s hanging out with his brothers and reports to them, “I had this dream last night; and in it, you all bowed down and worshipped me.” His brothers were furious. Always quick on the uptake, Joseph tells them a few days later: “I had another dream.” This time, it was not just his brothers, but also his mother and father, who were bowing down and worshipping him. A slow learner.

One day Jacob sent Joseph out to find his brothers where they were tending their sheep. A neighbor finds Joseph wandering around Shechem, unable to find his brothers or the sheep. The neighbor points Joseph in the right direction. He finds his brothers finally, but it does not go well. They have had it with him; think about killing him, but compromise by selling him to a traveling caravan (a classic sibling fantasy), and then going home and telling their father that Joseph has been killed by wild beasts. Joseph ends up in Egypt, where these dreams that have so far just gotten him into trouble now bring him to the attention of Pharaoh. Joseph the dreamer interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and predicts a coming famine; Pharaoh believes him, sets him up over all of Egypt, gives him power and authority second only to Pharaoh himself. Joseph causes the Egyptians to save their grain from seven good years to feed them during seven years of famine, and all is well in Egypt.

But things do not go so well for Jacob and his sons. Their experience of famine drives the sons thirteen years later to go to Egypt to buy grain. Joseph sees them, recognizes them, gets his revenge by playing some not-too-nice power games with them; but finally, in this morning’s reading, Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and is reconciled with them. Now I know all this makes a long story, but its very length is part of the point.

This morning I’d like to talk about family, and a biblical view of family life. We don’t often in the lectionary get handed the opportunity to talk about family, because family concerns are largely absent from the New Testament. Despite what some groups would have you think, from

the evidence of the gospels, it seems fairly clear that Jesus did not preach much, think much, or even care much about family life except maybe in the negative sense. He worried that a concern about family would hinder people in their pursuit of the kingdom of God. To find family stories, we need to turn to the Old Testament, and most richly, to Genesis.

So what do we find in these early families of faith, of which the Joseph cycle is one example? First of all, we find real flesh and blood families. The Genesis stories have not been sanitized or “nicened” up. In them, we find love and faith and deep commitment, children longed for and cherished, moments of great courage and wisdom. We also find petty intrigue and raging jealousy, sexual violence, physical violence, families torn apart by conflict, personality disorder, duplicity, betrayal, and alienation. It doesn’t look a lot different from families today. From the deep romantic love between Jacob and Rachel to the cry of “Mother always loved you best” in pretty much all of the patriarchal story cycles, biblical families look a lot like ours. Which some people might find discouraging. But I find it encouraging. So many people I know experience a sense of embarrassment or even shame that their families are less than perfect, thinking that if they were more godly, more faithful, then their families would look like Ozzie and Harriet, as if our greatest family trauma is supposed to be that David stayed out an hour beyond curfew or Rick threw a baseball through the neighbor’s window. I know no one’s life that is like that. Real life is hard and full of challenges. It makes me hopeful to know that the people of God have always struggled with issues as serious as divorce, alienation, addiction, betrayal; and these are the people with whom God consents- not just consents, even-but these are the people with whom God chooses to be. Real families with real problems, and they are the carriers of God’s promise from generation to generation.

Beyond that, as we see in the Joseph story this morning, family ties run deep. We follow the story of Joseph and his brothers from their youth to their maturity. Joseph, the clod, the nerd, the dreamer who couldn’t fit in, emerges from the callowness and trauma of his youth to become a man of spiritual substance, a great leader, a man who finally weeps with the joy of reconciliation with his brothers. And his brothers as well leave go their guilt to meet him as changed men after all their youth of jealousy and bickering and thirteen long years of complete alienation. After many years they come together whole.

One of the great privileges of my job is that I get to spend time with people during the hinge moments of their lives: weddings, and funerals, births, and divorces. Times when the way things have been change; and so often in those moments, as well as others-but particularly in those moments-there is a malleability in family form. All of a sudden, perspective shifts, new understanding is born, and relationships change. I have seen siblings who were never close before form a lasting bond taking care of a dying parent, divorced spouses brought to friendship at the time of their child’s wedding, parent and child reconciled when the first grandchild is born. It doesn’t always happen like that, but one of the gifts of family is its endurance. You are given chance after chance after chance to interact. Whether you want those chances or not, for most of us, there’s always going to be another family reunion, or wedding, or graduation, or funeral; and there’s weird Uncle Fred who you’ve avoided for years, who you see with astonishment gathering up the grandkids and enthraling them with his stories. There’s your sister Lucy who

has fallen in love with a wonderful man, and this new relationship gives her the confidence to quit her constant boasting that always drove you to distraction; and you find, to your surprise, that you like her. There's your dad welcoming your gay son with nothing but love in his eyes, and the pieces of the puzzle shift, and that which has long been broken holds the possibility of healing.

Sometimes we need just to be reminded of this possibility: that family relationships can change and heal, and reach a new wholeness, and family can be a blessing beyond price or words. Some of us need a reminder because this is the month that we've entirely lost our sense of humor about our family. A sense of humor is essential to surviving family. Or maybe some of us need a reminder because it's time to try again to be reconciled with a family member from whom we are distant. What is the reconciliation work that you could do in your family? It's a question most of us could think about. Or maybe we need to hear the Joseph story, to reflect on this powerful, difficult, wonderful gift that is family simply because too often we take it for granted. It's just there, and we forget to thank God that we were born capable of such complex relationship. It's just there; and we forget to thank God for being present with us on the good days and the bad days, and in the good years and in the bad years. We forget to thank God for that ever-changing group bound to us by love and tradition, by blood and promise, by pain inflicted and pain shared, and always the promise of hope: our families. Thanks be to God. Amen.