

Brothers  
Genesis 37:1 – 4, 12 – 28  
Sunday, August 9, 2020

Pastor and theologian Howard Thurman tells the story of a time when, as a child, he came upon his friend's baby sister playing with a rattlesnake. He was going over to the friend's house, and when he came into the yard, there was the girl, less than a year old, sitting in the sand with the snake. He describes it as "an amazing and deeply frightening experience to watch," as the girl would turn the snake over on its side and do various things with it, and the snake would crawl around her and over her. There was no fear or animosity between them; they were very obviously *playing* together. After a while, the little girl grew tired of playing and crawled back to the house, while the snake slithered off to the woods at the edge of the yard before being killed by the girl's father.

Thurman uses this story to talk about how there used to be an inherent connection between human beings and animals (even snakes), in which we related to each other without fear or animosity, but as *creatures* created by the same God. Over time, though, human beings came to view snakes and other wild animals as a threat to our safety and survival, so we distance ourselves from them. And when we *do* come into contact with them, we typically either flee from them or eliminate them. There is no community between us. We have forgotten our inherent connection as creatures of the same God.

Thurman goes on to relate this same point to human beings. We have become so divided and polarized that when we encounter a person who does not look, believe, or behave like we do, we have been conditioned to view that person as a threat to our wellbeing, and so we either *remove* ourselves from them or *attack* them. Thurman writes, "Fear keeps the doors between sealed. It

is a basic response to threat.”<sup>1</sup> Our communal life is disintegrating because we have forgotten our inherent connection as brothers and sisters, creatures of the same God.

This connection – the *forgetting* of it and the *remembrance* of it – lies at the heart of Joseph’s story.

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For the past several weeks, we have been following the story of Isaac and Jacob. This week we begin a new section of Genesis in which we hear the story of Jacob’s son, Isaac’s grandson, Joseph. And right away we see that if *this* is the family that God is planning on using to bless the world, then we’ve got problems! Whatever problems you might have in your own family, however dysfunctional things might be, this story should at least give you hope, because if God can do something with *this* bunch, then God can certainly do something with all of *our* families.

We have seen dysfunction all throughout the stories of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. There is lying, cheating, stealing, betrayal, and attempted murder all between siblings, spouses, parents, and children. *But*, this story of Joseph and his brothers comes right on the heels of the reconciliation between Jacob and Esau after more than 20 years of conflict. Their father Isaac has died, and the two of them come together to bury him. So we think that everything is fine now. But right away in Joseph’s story, we run into a problem. As it introduces us to Joseph and his brothers, it says, “Now Israel (remember, that’s Jacob’s new name) loved Joseph more than any of his other children.” Jacob has 12 children, and Joseph is his favorite.

If you remember a few weeks ago, we heard the story of how Jacob wanted to marry Rachel, but Rachel’s father Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah. So Jacob married her, but it says that

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, pg. 63.

he loved Rachel more than Leah. And when God saw that Leah was unloved, he blessed her with many sons, thinking *that* would turn Jacob's heart toward her. So they had all these sons together, but Joseph was the first child that Jacob had with Rachel, the wife that he loved. In Jacob's mind, Joseph was *really* his firstborn son, so he loved him more than all the others. And it says, "When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they *hated* him, and could not speak peaceably to him."

Now, the lectionary (the calendar of assigned scripture readings) has us reading verses 1–4 and 12–28, but it skips verses 5–11, which are *critically* important to understanding Joseph's story. These seven verses tell about some dreams that Joseph had. And *in* these dreams, Joseph's 11 brothers were all bowing down to him. He was greater than all of them. (That's the kind of dream that's *probably* a good idea to keep to yourself, not tell your brothers about it. But Joseph doesn't do that. He tells *everyone* about it.) When his brothers heard about these dreams, it says they were jealous of him and hated him even more. That, combined with their father loving Joseph more than them, and Joseph apparently being kind of a tattletale, always bringing bad reports of the brothers to their father, led to their hatred of him.

So one day when the brothers are out tending the sheep, they see Joseph coming, and they say, "Here comes this dreamer. Let's kill him and throw him into a pit, and we'll tell dad that a wild animal ate him." It has gone so far and gotten so bad that they actually make a plan to kill their brother. But one of the brothers, Reuben, says, "No, no, no. Let's not *kill* him. Let's just throw him into the pit." Now, he wasn't saying this out of love for his brother or the kindness of his heart. Reuben had a plan to *rescue* Joseph and be the *hero* so their father would think highly of *him*. These brothers are all scheming and plotting against one another!

When Joseph comes, they grab him and throw him into the pit, and then it says they *sit down to eat*. How callous and uncaring that they are eating lunch after having betrayed their brother. He's still down in the hole, screaming up at them for help, and they're having a snack. They see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming. Now remember, Ishmael was their grandfather Isaac's half-brother, so these are the people of their great uncle. This is their family. And they say, "What good is it if we *kill* Joseph? Let's *sell* him instead, so that we can at least make something off of him." So they sell their brother as a slave to their great uncle's family, and they take Joseph away to Egypt, where he spends the next twenty-plus years, some of it in slavery and prison and suffering.

They are *brothers*. Whatever their differences, they are part of the same family, children of the same father. But they have forgotten their inherent connection as brothers.

And so have we. (Now, obviously, when we talk about "brothers" here and being sons of the same father, that's the imagery that's used in the text. While the language here is primarily *male*, it is just as applicable to *all* of us, men *and* women, brothers *and* sisters, children of the same father. I don't want us to get hung up on the *language* here, because the *point* that it's making transcends that.) When we look at the world around us right now, at how polarized and divided we have become along so many different lines, we see what we saw in Joseph and his brothers. Whether it's divisions of *race*, *gender*, *politics* (liberal/conservative, Republican/Democrat), *religious* divisions, *socio-economic* divisions; we look at someone on the other side of that division and see them as a threat to our wellbeing, our way of life. And like Joseph and his brothers, every little thing causes us to hate them *even more*, so that we cannot speak peaceably to one another.

We have forgotten our inherent connection as brothers and sisters, children of the same father, creatures of the same God. That's why these stories are so important. Because if we look back to the stories Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see that at some point we are all connected and our differences vanish. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all trace their common ancestry back to Abraham; Isaac is the ancestor of Jews and Christians, while Ishmael is the ancestor of Muslims, but they were *brothers*, children of the same father. And Genesis gives us this beautiful story about the two of them coming together to bury their father. These stories remind us of our common ancestry, our inherent connection as brothers and sisters, children of the same father, creatures of the same God. Whether black or white, rich or poor, liberal or conservative, we are *family*. And just as the story of Joseph is a story about *remembering* our inherent connection as family, when *we* can remember that connection in our interactions with one another, while it won't *erase* all the differences between us, maybe it will at least make us mindful of a bigger picture and help us speak peaceably with one another.

Families aren't perfect. Genesis definitely shows us that. But it also shows us that in the midst of their differences and disagreements, we can come together when we need to, because there is something greater that binds us together. Ishmael and Isaac came back together. Jacob and Esau came back together. Joseph and his brothers come back together. And we can come back together, too. We just have to be able to look at one another and remember, "This is my brother. This is my sister. We are children of the same father, creatures of the same God. This person is not my *enemy*. They are my *family*. And the calling of Christ is to find a way to *love* them, even in the midst of our differences and disagreements. To nurture within ourselves the capacity to love others – *all* others – so that we can come to see even those we think of as *enemies* as *family*."

Howard Thurman tells the story that I shared with you in the beginning about the child and the snake in a book called *The Search for Common Ground*. And he ends that book by saying, “Here and there will be those who will walk out under the stars and think lonely thoughts about whence they came and the meaning that their presence in the heavens inspires. They will wonder and ponder heavy thoughts about man and his destiny under the stars. One day there will stand up in their midst one who will tell of a new sickness among the children who in their delirium cry for their brothers whom they have never known and from whom they have been cut off behind the self-imposed barriers of their fathers. An alarm will spread throughout the community that it is being felt and slowly realized that community cannot feed for long on itself; it can only flourish where always the boundaries are giving way to the coming of others from beyond them – unknown and undiscovered brothers. Then the wisest among them will say: What we have sought we have found, our own sense of identity. We have an established center out of which at last we can function and relate to other men. We have committed to heart and to nervous system a feeling of belonging and our spirits are no longer isolated and afraid. We have lost our fear of our brothers and are no longer ashamed of ourselves, of who and what we are – Let us now go forth to save the land of our birth from the plague that first drove us into the “will to quarantine” and to separate ourselves behind self-imposed walls. For this is why we were born: Men, all men (and women) belong to each other, and he who shuts himself away diminishes himself, and he who shuts another away from him destroys himself.”<sup>2</sup>

We begin to lose our fear of one another by remembering our inherent connection as brothers and sisters. So let us pray *with* and *for* one another, asking God’s blessing on *all* people. Let us pray...

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<sup>2</sup> Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, pg. 104.