

Family Ties
Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28
Sunday, August 13, 2023

Let us pray: Show us who you are, Lord, and who you are calling *us* to be, in Christ. Amen.

[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 walked 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 run away from them or get rid of them. There is no community between us. Thurman says that we have forgotten our inherent connection as creatures of the same God.

And he goes on to relate this same point to human beings. He says that 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.”¹ 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.

For the next few weeks, the lectionary has us looking at the story of Joseph. Now, this is not Joseph the father of Jesus. This is around 1,800 years *before* Christ. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. The biblical story follows through Isaac. Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob had twelve sons, one of whom was Joseph. Jacob loved Joseph more than any of his other children, because Joseph was the first son that he had with Rachel, the wife that he loved. (Jacob was also married to a woman named Leah, but he was *tricked* into marrying Leah, so he didn’t really love her. This is a highly functional family we’re dealing with here...)

So in Jacob’s mind, Joseph was *really* his firstborn son, because it was his first son with his “real” wife. He loved him so much that he gave him an Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. That’s where a lot of us know Joseph from. Some translations of the Bible call it a “coat of many colors.” The Hebrew actually describes it as a tunic with long sleeves. It was like a long-sleeved shirt that went all the way down to his feet.

Why does that matter? Because it was a garment of *luxury*. Jacob’s family were shepherds. You were not tending sheep if you were wearing something like this. It would be like wearing a ball gown to do construction work. And we see that in the story. Joseph’s brothers are all out

¹ Howard Thurman, *The Search for Common Ground*, pg. 63.

working, but Joseph is *not*. Jacob makes all his other sons work. But he doesn't make *Joseph* work. 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 then 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 hear about these dreams, it says they are jealous of him and hate him even more.

So one day when the brothers are out tending the sheep, they see Joseph coming in his fancy tunic that their father gave him, 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, but keep him alive." Now, he wasn't saying this out of love for his brother or the kindness of his heart. Reuben had a plan. He was going 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*. (Presumably sandwiches made by their brother, Reuben.) How callous and uncaring that they are sitting around the pit, 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*, *sexuality*, *politics* (liberal/conservative, Republican/Democrat), *religious* divisions, *socio-economic* divisions; we look at someone on the other side of that divide 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 of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we see that at some point we are all connected. 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 (Ishmael and Isaac) coming back together after years of estrangement 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.

When I was growing up, we would have family dinners at my grandparents' house, where politics and religion were openly discussed and debated at the dinner table. My uncle would espouse one viewpoint, my parents another, and I would argue even another. The conversations could get pretty intense, but at the end of the day we were still family, we still loved one another, and we still came back to the table together the next time.

I loved those dinners, and I loved the conversation. I rarely agreed with what my uncle said, but I had to listen to him, and I came to understand where he was coming from. I am accustomed to living in the tension between differing viewpoints. It has *enriched* my life and my ability to be a pastor, because when I hear a viewpoint different than mine expressed, I don't see an opponent or enemy. I see my uncle; *family*.

It was so funny to me last week, when I told you about the project that I'm doing for my doctoral thesis. I said that I needed at least ten people to commit to a series of conversations, and that

ideally, half of them would identify politically as conservative, and half of them as liberal. And do you remember what the response was? There was this collective, “Oooh!” among us. It was kind of this nervous, anxious, “What are you doing?? Are you sure this is a good idea??” Because we have been *told* that it’s *not*. We have been *told* that that doesn’t work. That we are too different. That this other person is *bad*. That there is no room for dialogue between us, because you’re just going to keep believing what you believe, and they’re just going to keep believing what they believe, so what’s the point in talking about it? It will only lead to fighting.

And that may very well be true. That’s why my doctoral work is based on a *hypothesis*, a *hunch*. But my hunch is that I think it’s a *lie*. I think it is a lie that we have been told about each other by people who have a vested interest in keeping us polarized. I think the *truth* is that, while it may be difficult, there are ways that we can nurture *understanding* among people who believe differently, so that we can talk about difficult things. I believe the *truth* is that God created each one of us; God did not create us exactly the same (*intentionally!*); and God has called us to live life together finding unity in Christ in the midst of our differences.

And if we are waiting for someone else to do that *for* us, for a politician or whoever to bring us together, then we are inevitably going to be disappointed. That’s *our* job. And it starts with the ways that each one of us seeks to listen to and understand and love the person right in front of you, each moment of each day, despite the differences between you. It is about *remembering* that *in Christ* we are *family*, brothers and sisters, children of the same father, creatures of the same God.

Families aren’t perfect. Genesis definitely shows us that from beginning to end. But it also shows us that in the midst of our differences and disagreements, we can come together when we

need to, because there is something greater than our differences 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*, in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.