

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 “Putting the Fun in DysFUNCTIONal” –

A few weeks ago someone made a comment about something I said in a sermon. They said, “You always talk about how much you love the stories of the Old Testament, but honestly you don’t preach from the Old Testament that much!” Guilty as charged. So let’s change that. The passage on the table this morning is part of the story of how the nation of Israel came to be. Three of the world’s major monotheistic religions trace their origins back to these stories -- Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We call them “Abrahamic Faith Traditions” because Abraham and his descendants was where the ball started rolling for all three of these religions. Islam claims to be the descendants of Abraham’s son Ishmael. Judaism and Christianity claim to be descendants of Abraham’s son Jacob. Jacob’s name was eventually changed to Israel so you can see why his story is important. Jacob had 12 sons by four women -- Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Issachar, Zebulun, Joseph and Benjamin. Those sons represent the 12 tribes that eventually became the nation of Israel. What Barbara read was a little snippet of what it was like growing up in the house of Jacob, or the house of Israel. It does not read like an episode of the *Brady Bunch*. More like a jacked-up version of *Days of Our Lives*.

So if you were to look at the story of Israel as a TV series, this would be the episode where the attention starts to focus on Joseph. Papa Jacob had a history of playing favorites. Joseph’s mother, Rachael, was the favorite of Jacob’s two wives. Rachael struggled with infertility for many years which created some interesting tension between her and Jacob’s other wife Leah, who also happened to be Rachael’s sister. See, this is already sounding pretty sketchy, but that’s just because we don’t fully understand that culture. Rachael was insecure about her status as “favorite wife” because she couldn’t bear Jacob a son. But Leah didn’t have any trouble in the fertility department. So Rachael forced her handmaiden Bilah to marry Jacob and become her surrogate. But then Leah retaliated and forced her handmaiden Zilpah to become *her* surrogate. There are scraps of paper and pencils in the pew racks in case

you need to draw this out to keep up with who is related to whom. It's important to know this back story because the rivalries that we see between the sons in our text today make a whole lot more sense when you consider the level of dysfunction that's already present in this family. So why is Joseph the favorite son? He's not the oldest. That's Reuben. He's not the youngest. That's Benjamin. Scholars wager that it's because Joseph was the first child that Rachael was able to give Jacob and that this child probably looked the most like her. Joseph's favored status didn't go over so well with his brothers.

So let's set aside the fact that Joseph could be an annoying little tattletale. People want to say that this is why his brothers hated him so much, but I think it had to do less with who he was and more to do with what he represented. Hooray for Joseph, the long awaited son of Jacob, born of his favorite wife Rachael. Isn't he just a little bundle of blessings? To add insult to injury, Joseph started getting preferential treatment. He got away with saying bad things about his brothers. And as if this weren't bad enough, Jacob gave Joseph a special robe to wear ... a "coat of many colors" which was a daily, visible reminder to all the other sons that this kid was *special*. It's no wonder that Joseph had dreams about being worshipped! He practically was! Eventually the other brothers had enough of him. They tried to get away from him. But then "Little Joe" would catch up and find them and tell them about all these dreams he was having about everyone bowing down and worshipping him. By this time, the brothers wanted Joseph dead. They came up with this plan to beat him to death and toss his lifeless corpse into a pit for the animals to eat. But then Reuben, the oldest son, stepped in and got his brothers to back off a bit. "You know, let's just beat him up and throw him in a pit. We shouldn't kill him ourselves." Now honestly I don't think Reuben was being merciful here. I think maybe he was being opportunistic because this was his chance to gain favor with his father. He figured that maybe later he'd go fetch Joseph out of the pit and bring him back home to Papa Jacob and be the hero. Then maybe *he'd* be the "favorite son" as it should be.

But then the other brothers started thinking opportunistically too. “Hey, maybe instead of just letting him die, we can figure out a way to get something out of this. Oh my gosh! You know what we can do? You guys are going to love this. We can sell him into slavery!” Now think about this. These people are the *descendants* of slaves! Their whole identity centers on God delivering them out of slavery in Egypt so that they could be a great nation! So what do they do? They sell Joseph *back into slavery*! Could you just imagine Simeon saying, “Oh, you know what would be just ... perfect? If we sell this kid to the slavers and he winds up back in Egypt!” And guess what? That’s *exactly* what happened. So there you have it. A sordid little story about a ridiculously dysfunctional family with all the themes of jealousy, pride, vengeance, arrogance, the desire to be loved, admired and seen! Why is this story in the Bible? Aren’t these “heroes of the faith” the ones we’re supposed to be emulating? Aren’t these the people that God hand-picked to be an example to the world? How can any of this be good?

Before we get all judgy, let’s consider for a moment what *we* turn to for entertainment. With the exception of some classic family-friendly shows like “*Leave it to Beaver*” and “*The Andy Griffith Show*” what have been some of the most popular TV shows in recent history? *The Sopranos*, a show about a dysfunctional mob family. *Sons of Anarchy*, a show about a dysfunctional biker family. *Shameless*, a show about a family whose dysfunctions are too numerous to even name. Why do we watch these shows? Maybe it’s because at some level, we can all see these dysfunctional characteristics in our own lives. From a modern-day perspective, there doesn’t seem to be anything in this Biblical story worth emulating, right? The problem is, even though these stories seem like shining examples of what *not* to do, they are familiar because sometimes we can place ourselves in them. Maybe you don’t come from a family who is so dysfunctional that the siblings would gang up on the “favorite” kid to sell her into slavery. But ... you might come from a family where the *thought* crossed your mind!

There is a level of dysfunction in every family system. Part of being in the ministry involves helping people deal with the consequences and outcome of both personal and family dysfunction. Now ... which area of ministry do you think I encounter dysfunction the most? “Oh, it’s got to be outreach and service ... seeing people struggling with homelessness and addiction and poverty and injustice.” Yeah, I see a good deal of it there. But no. “Oh! Well it’s got to be counseling then, right?” Yes, I encounter dysfunction there for sure, but by the time I’m doing counseling, people have at least *recognized* their dysfunction and want to do something about it. No, you know where I see the most raw, audible, visible, un-edited, I-wish-I-had-a-security-guard-on-staff-level dysfunction? Daggone weddings and funerals. Funerals especially. And I’m not very good at dealing with that stuff either! I’m a bible nerd who likes to tell people about Jesus! Thankfully I have a wife who did a couple of rotations in ER and Trauma Centers as a chaplain. She’s good. They have her on speed dial over at Newton-Bracewell for when families who got kicked off the Jerry Springer Show walk in the door. Grief stirs things up. What I’m saying is that we all have experienced or have at least borne witness to gut-wrenching, family destroying, dysfunction.

This riot over the weekend in Charlottesville, Virginia ... the one that so far has left 3 people dead and 19 injured? One of my favorite authors, Diana Butler-Bass, lost a brother because of that incident. And no, he wasn’t one of the ones who was killed there. He wasn’t even in Charlottesville at the time. No, he was a vocal supporter and defender of the torch-wielding, White Nationalist crowd that marched into town chanting old Nazi slogans ... a crowd that included Neo-Nazi groups and the Ku-Klux-Klan. And Diana, an ordained Episcopal minister said, “You cannot call yourself a Christian and stand in solidarity with groups who oppose everything that Jesus stood for and taught.” And her brother disowned her. No, there was no selling anyone into slavery. There was no violence. Back in June, during my “shocking requirements to follow Jesus” series, I talked about how the values of Jesus would

divide some families. Here's an example of that. A sister spoke the gospel truth and lost a brother.

So again, what can we take away from *these* stories especially when we run into shocking displays of dysfunction like the ones in our scripture this morning? In the case of this story Joseph's brothers probably thought they were delivering some divine justice by selling this kid back to Egypt. They probably had a good laugh over the irony of it. See, I think we're able to get the most out of this story when we can place ourselves in them and recognizing *our own* similar feelings of jealousy, and pride and our desire for vengeance. Sometimes it requires some painful self-reflection, but nobody, Jesus included, promised that maturity and growth would be painless.

That's the beauty of these stories that we read in the Bible. They stir up feelings. They cause us to stop and ponder and reflect. As extreme as the dysfunctional dynamics are in this story, there is a point when we need to recognize that this is *our* story too. We are all members of a dysfunctional *human family* that desperately needs redemption. The good news is that we can learn something from this story *if* we're willing to be honest and see ourselves in it. Next week, we're going to see how the story unfolds when Joseph gets to reunite with his brothers after his "adventures" in Egypt. Will the brothers finish the job? Will Joseph get revenge? And where does God fit into all of this? Tune in next week ... same time, same channel.