

“Dysfunctional Family Promise”**OT 14A-17****Aug. 10, 2008****Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28****Matthew 14: 22-33****8.13.17 – Rev. Rob Carter****Prayer for Illumination**

God of Creation, God of Israel, God of us all,

We come to your Word, read and proclaimed, hoping to catch a better sense of all that you are,
and all you intend us to be.

May your Spirit speak to us, and may we have the courage and faith to respond. Through Christ
we pray. Amen.

Matthew 14: 22-33

Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat
and go on ahead to the other side,
while he dismissed the crowds.

And after he had dismissed the crowds,
he went up the mountain by himself to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone,
but by this time the boat, battered by the waves,
was far from the land, for the wind was against them.

And early in the morning he came walking toward them on the sea.

But when the disciples saw him walking toward them on the sea,
they were terrified, saying, “It is a ghost!”

And they cried out in fear.

But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said,
“Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.”

Peter answered him,
“Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

He said, “Come.”

So Peter got out of the boat,
started walking on the water, and came toward Jesus.

But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened,
and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!”

Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him,
saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

When they got into the boat, the wind ceased.

And those in the boat worshipped him, saying,
“Truly you are the Son of God.”

“Dysfunctional Family Promise”

Dysfunctional. We cannot read our Old Testament lesson this morning without admitting that the first family of our faith is just about as dysfunctional as it gets.

Think about it. God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave the only life they’d ever known in a place called Ur, and go to a land called “Canaan.” In doing so, God promises them a legacy of proportions no one could ever dream.

But it takes decades... decades and decades of waiting before God’s promise even begins coming to fruition with the birth of their only son, Isaac. But what does Abraham do when Isaac is but an adolescent? As we read a few weeks ago, he straps wood on his back, takes him up a mountain, and comes within a half second of killing him—the heir of the promise—before God finally stops the whole terrifying ordeal.

Thankfully, Isaac lives. And eventually has two sons himself. Twins, in fact. The first-born, Esau, is the rightful heir of the promise. But his younger brother, Jacob, deceptively tricks their father and flat-out steals Esau’s birthright.

And it takes decades... decades and decades for this wound to heal... for these two brothers to reunite... for this first family of our faith to reconcile at long last.

Thankfully, they do. And we hope beyond hope that the next generation learns from their parents’ mistakes. But no. This morning’s lesson proves how hard it is to break with personal and familial fears and insecurities.

For as Judy read, Jacob still doesn’t appreciate the full perils of sibling rivalry. He has no problem making plain that Joseph is his favorite son, setting Joseph up on a collision course with his brothers.

Still, Joseph isn’t innocent in all of this, either, as he doesn’t seem to have much of a problem wearing his father’s favor as a badge of honor. He even dares to dream dreams of God’s favor, lauding them in his brothers’ faces.

So in our passage today, the sibling rivalry reaches full boil. Joseph’s brothers have had enough. They determine to do away with Daddy’s favorite once and for all, selling him—their own brother—as a slave to a group of Ishmaelites heading off to Egypt.

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Now... I get that this is the first family of our Judea-Christian tradition...
 I get that this is the family through whom God initiated a covenant with humanity,
 making clear that God is their God and they are God’s people.
 I get that this is the family who would grow to become the entire people Israel...
 the people through whom God would choose to become incarnate...
 the people to whom Jesus the Christ belonged...
 the people through whom God made a *new* covenant built on God’s unconditional
 love and grace for you and for me and for all.

Make no mistake—this is a special family.

But let's be clear. They're a mess! And a disastrous mess at that—unable to get out of their own way, what with the way they threaten each other's lives... steal each other's inheritances... sell each off into slavery.

It's easy to wonder... why in the world did God choose them? Why *this* family? They're just so dysfunctional... they're so darn helpless... they're so broken... they're so much like you and me.

For if you look closely with honest eyes... I bet you can see glimpses of you and your family in their story. I know I can.

Glimpses of young adults struggling to break through some of the more painful cycles of previous generations.

Glimpses of parents agonizing over how to love and raise a healthy child.

Glimpses of siblings in a lifelong battle for a parent's favor.

Glimpses of people wrestling with such insecurity that they'll do almost anything to eliminate a perceived threat.

We may wonder why God chose this family, as dysfunctional and broken as they are. But then again, *perhaps that's the very point*. Perhaps God chose this family because they are as we are. Chock full of insecurities and faults and fears that come to life in ways that can be ugly... brutal, even.

Which raises some interesting questions. For example, did God really want Jacob to steal Esau's birthright? Was that part of God's plan all along, or did God simply refuse to give up on this dysfunctional family and, instead, find a way to keep covenant with them even though Jacob did such a terrible thing?

And in this story, did God really want Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery? Joseph seems to think as much later on in the narrative. Or was it that God was as appalled at their lack of love as we might be... but instead of abandoning them, did God determine to find yet another way to keep covenant with Israel even though they couldn't keep covenant with God?

Asked another way, did God really want Joseph sold into slavery and for Israel to eventual fall as slaves to Egypt? Or is the Exodus story really God's way of cleaning up a big family mess? Of moving from Plan A to Plan B, so to speak?

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You see, I used to read this story as if it was all God's grand plan all along. That God had actually planned for Joseph to be sold into slavery. But I don't read it that way anymore.

For what we see throughout Scripture, as well as our daily living, is that God doesn't stop us from messing up. We may wish God did. Certainly, after witnessing the horror of Charlottesville this past weekend, we may wish God would jump in and prevent humanity from doing things we shouldn't. But God's never been in the business of forcing us to behave. God has already made it clear... the choice to abide by God's will or not is up to us. God won't make us treat the last like they're first and the least like they're the greatest. God won't force us to love others as ourselves... to offer compassion instead of judgment... to speak peace instead of division. We know God wants all these things... but God doesn't force us to do any of it.

Charlottesville is yet another painful reminder—as we have seen people who choose to live for division, rather than mutuality. People who seek to build dividing walls rather than striving to tear them down. In Charlottesville this weekend we saw and heard and some of us may have also felt, firsthand, that outright horror that occurs when people choose to judge and condemn others based on things like appearance, or color, or religion, or ethnicity... and try to intimidate those they hate and stoke their fears in order to push them away.

That's what we saw on the news and in our social media feeds. But this weekend should also remind and convict us—as it certainly reminds and convicts me—of the horror that occur when good people... when faithful people fall silent in the face of evil. For far too often... good people... faithful people rationalize that we don't have much to say in matters like this since we weren't the ones marching... As if we don't have much to say since we weren't the ones fanning the flames of division... since we weren't the ones practicing the overt bigotry.

But the truth is, friends, bigotry still exists in this land, in part, because the Church and people of faith have a history of using religion as a means of division rather than unification. There's a reason the old maxim holds true—America's most segregated time is on Sunday mornings.

Truth is, we struggle to talk about issues like race and discrimination in America because, well, we either believe it doesn't exist—something Charlottesville blatantly contradicts—or we may be uncomfortable talking about it because we don't fully understand it. I mean, I know that I, as a white middle-class male, don't know the first thing of what it's like to face discrimination. So often we find that the Church is rather silent on these issues.

And here's the thing... we *can* fall silent because God won't force us to speak or act out on such issues any more than God will prevent those hatemongers from spewing their venom in the first place. It's how the whole cycle of dysfunction continues.

But thankfully... some did use their gifts for God's purposes in Charlottesville. Some found the courage of their faith to stand up to and speak out for peace and love and equality to counter the chants of hatred and division lobbed all around. They included citizens who came from across the area. But they also included lots and lots of college students from University of VA, who were out both Friday night and all day Saturday. And churches in the area had gathered to organize their own marches. And their clergy and members lined the streets with voices to speak love in a display of their faith in the face of fear.

Faith in the face of fear...

Faith in the face of fear...

That, I think is what we need so much more of, frankly.

Faith in the face of fear...

For so many of our problems... including bigotry, I believe... are born not first in hatred, but in fear. Fear of those different from us. Fear of those we don't understand. Fear of our own privileged group losing its privilege. Fear of our own powerful kind losing some of its power. So it seems to me that faith in the face of fear... faith in the face of fear just might be exactly the kind of thing we need.

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We see that very visualization in our Gospel lesson this morning.

Matthew tells us the disciples are in a boat out at sea, caught in the midst of a raging storm. They look up and see what seems to be a man, walking on the water. And they're terrified. Some think it's a ghost; others cry out in fear.

So Jesus calls out, "Take heart, it's me; don't be afraid."

It sounds like Jesus'. But Peter wants to make sure. "Lord, if it's you, command me to come to you on the water."

So Jesus, eager for his disciples to find peace even amid the storm, obliges Peter's request. "Come," he tells him.

And in an amazing scene, Peter courageously summons the faith to step out of the boat, into the middle of a dark, raging sea.

And to his and everyone's amazement, Peter doesn't drop into the water. He stands upon it... and actually begins to walk on the water. Miracle of miracles... the impossible not just made possible, but actually becoming reality!

Except, as the winds continue to blow, and the waves continue to crash, Peter begins to realize just how unrealistic this whole spectacle really is. People don't walk on water! Never mind the fact that he's actually doing it... this world says this simply can't happen.

So Peter grows frightened, and begins to sink into the water as his fears and doubts overcome the amazing faith that had led him out of the boat in the first place.

"Lord, save me!" he cries out.

Jesus reaches out and catches Peter, pulling him out of the water and into the boat. "Oh you of little faith," Jesus tells Peter. "Why do you doubt? Why do you doubt when you can see for yourself what is possible?"

Jesus isn't scolding Peter. In many ways, I'm sure he's proud of him. Instead, as scholars explain it, this "is not the story of the skeptic who habitually doubts, but the story of the faithful follower who becomes overwhelmed by the circumstances surrounding him, who begins to lose his nerve when he discovers the odds stacked against him, but who from Jesus finds a steadying, delivering hand."¹

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Jesus understands that it's hard to confront what we'd rather not face. It's hard to find the faith to confront our dysfunction... our insecurities... our brokenness. Just as it's hard to confront our reluctance to stand down hate when it might cost us something of value.

So sometimes... sometimes, frankly... we fail.

Like Jacob, and his sons... sometimes we fall down amid our dysfunction. We let fear get the better of our faith.

But the good news we encounter throughout the generations of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph... the good news we see throughout the life of Israel... the good news incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ and throughout the life of the early church is that, while

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles Cousar, Beverly Gaventa, James Newsome. *Texts for Preaching—Year A* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995) 442.

fears and storms have and will continue to have their way with us—while our fear, at times, will get the better of our faith—when it does, God stands ready to reach out and save us.

For as the counter protestors in Charlottesville also reveal, ours is a God who refuses to give up on us...

And while we—and everyone else in this world—so often get it wrong—God’s promises and plans for our future are more powerful than even our deepest fears and our greatest failures. Frankly, it’s what redemption is all about. God is with us and God is for us.

So let us admit to our dysfunction. Let’s face up to our fears. And then, with lives blessed by grace and the gifts of the Spirit, let us forge on with a courageous faith as we seek to “live and share God’s abundant life”² in daring, life-giving ways. Let us take risks for love. Let us speak out for equality. Let Towson Presbyterian Church proclaim the Gospel of God’s love for all people—black and white and Asian and Hispanic and Jew and Muslim and Hindu and Buddhist and Gay and Bi and Transgender and Straight and poor and homeless and hungry and you and me and the ones we love and the ones we hate.

For as the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King wrote in a letter from a Birmingham jail to white clergy who were standing on the sidelines amid the civil rights movement, ““We must come to see that human progress never rolls in on wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless and persistent work of men (and women) willing to be co-workers with God...”³

So while we might fail at times, God stands ready to reach out, pick us up, that we can again strive to live as God’s co-workers.

² David Lose, <http://www.davidlose.net/2017/08/pentecost-10-a-something-more/>

³ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. http://okra.stanford.edu/transcription/document_images/undecided/630416-019.pdf