**Preaching Notes**

**Pentecost 9.A.2014**

**Old Testament Track: Learning about Faith from the First Families**

**Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28**

I am feeling very lucky this week because I am fortunate to have become acquainted with Dr. Brian Sigmon, the new Editor of Adult Teaching & Learning Resources at The United Methodist Publishing House, who just happens to be an expert on Joseph. (Contact Dr. Sigmon at bsigmon@umpublishing.org, or write to him c/o The United Methodist Publishing House, 201 Eighth Avenue South, PO Box 801, Nashville, TN 37202.)

Dr. Sigmon recently completed his PhD in Old Testament at Marquette University, where the title of his dissertation was “Between Eden and Egypt: Echoes of the Garden Narrative in the Story of Joseph and His Brothers.”

I wrote Dr. Sigmon to ask if he had any insights into the story, especially in light of our recent expedition through many dysfunctional escapades of the First Families in the Faith. I am delighted to share his comments with you over the next two weeks. In my initial email I wrote,

I have been working on a series called "First Families in the Faith," dealing with basically the patriarchs over the last couple of months. I have really been focusing on the kind of messed-up faith messages that we get from these families, the problems they have, the squabbling and dysfunction, kind of comparing it all to a soap opera, but then trying to tease something out about how the stories contribute to our faith in God.

Here is what Brian had to say about his research project and the particulars of this week’s text:

The overall argument of my work is that the Joseph story contains allusions to the story of Adam and Eve in Eden, as well as the story of Cain and Abel. In addition, a lot of what I do [in my research project] focuses on the connections between stories of family conflict in Genesis—the hostile relationships we see between Cain and Abel, Isaac and Ishmael (embodied more strongly between Sarah and Hagar), Jacob and Esau, Rachel and Leah, and Joseph and his brothers. We see it also, to a much lesser extent, between Abraham and Lot, Isaac and Rebekah, and Jacob and Laban. It all combines to create a pattern of conflict that has a number of repeated features:

  1.  It's almost always a conflict between two people, most often designated as "brothers." This is even more pronounced in Hebrew, since the word for “brother” is also used to refer more broadly to "kinsman." It is even true in a sense for Joseph and his brothers, since “the brothers” can usually be regarded collectively as one entity. They almost always act in concert, never individually. Judah and Reuben are exceptions to this rule (see Genesis 37:21-22, 26-27), though Judah is best seen as a representative of the whole group (especially in Genesis 44:18-34).

  2.  It's usually a conflict of older vs. younger, where the conflict originates because the younger is chosen or favored, either by God or by parents (usually both), and this goes against the normal expectation for the older to be the chosen heir. Abel, Isaac, Jacob, Rachel, and Joseph are all younger siblings, who receive favor while their older siblings do not.

  3.  The pattern often involves the death of the younger son, either real or symbolic. Often the symbolic death comes in the form of a real threat of death that is narrowly averted. Abel suffers the only actual death, as he is murdered by Cain (Genesis 4). Isaac is nearly sacrificed by Abraham (Genesis 22). Esau threatens Jacob's life, causing him to flee Canaan (Genesis 27). Joseph is thrown into a well (perhaps a symbolic burial), nearly killed by his brothers, sold into slavery, and declared dead by his brothers (Genesis 37). Biblical scholar Jon Levenson has a book called *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son* that explores this aspect of the motif in great detail. As the title indicates, Levenson sees resonances between this motif in Genesis and the death and resurrection of Christ, God's beloved son.

  4.  The pattern also frequently involves a form of exile, that is, sending away, for one of the brothers. Cain becomes a wanderer on the earth, sent away from God's presence (Genesis 4:12, 16). Ishmael is sent away from Abraham's household (Genesis 21). Jacob flees to Paddan-Aram (Genesis 27-28), and upon his return Esau leaves Canaan to settle in Seir (Genesis 33:12-17). Joseph is sent away to Egypt, and by the end of the story all the brothers are "exiled" to Egypt together, outside the Promised Land.

  5.  The Joseph story is the only one in which we see the conflict fully resolved with forgiveness and reconciliation. Things between family members start out bad in Genesis, and gradually get better. Cain and Abel set up a negative pattern with Cain killing his brother. In all subsequent instances, the conflict is resolved not by death, but by separation. The Joseph story, however, ends with the family together. Joseph does not become the heir of the family alone, like Isaac and Jacob did. Rather, Joseph and all of his brothers are the ancestors of the twelve tribes of Israel together. Part of the argument I make in my dissertation is that Joseph's brothers are faced with the same situation Cain encountered, but they perform better because they do not kill their brother. This emerges most clearly in Gen 44, when Judah offers to become a slave in Benjamin's place, effectively sacrificing himself for his more-beloved younger brother.

The lectionary texts for the Joseph story, Gen 37:1-4, 12-28 [this week’s text] and Gen 45:1-15 [next week’s text], are the introduction of the central conflict—Joseph's brothers hate him and sell him into slavery—and the resolution of that conflict—Joseph forgives his brothers.

The hatred that Joseph's brothers have for him is the result of many factors, which accumulate in their minds. First is the bad report that Joseph brings about his brothers (Genesis 37:2); then is Jacob's obvious love for Joseph (37:3), demonstrated by his gift of the coat of many colors (or “long robe,” depending on your translation); then, last of all, are the dreams (37:5-11). The dreams are the straw that breaks the camel's back, so to speak. When the brothers contemplate killing Joseph, they refer primarily to his dreams: "Here comes the big dreamer…we will see what becomes of his dreams!" (37:19-20).

So as we come into the homestretch of our series on the First Families in the Faith, once again we are going to be left with unresolved conflict. A cliffhanger, if you will. But next week, we are going to find a great word of hope in all of this, again courtesy of Dr. Sigmon. So be sure to tune for next week’s episode of “As the Old Testament Turns!”

My suggestion for preaching this text, then, would be to focus on telling the story in a way that brings out the “accumulation of hatred,” to use Dr. Sigmon’s phrase, that has built up for these brothers.

Lots of times in dysfunctional families the accumulation of hatred and ill will develops over a lifetime, or even over generations. I would suggest that this is indeed what we see in these stories of family dysfunction in the Book of Genesis.

In a church I once served there was a couple who always came in through the front door. Even if it was pouring down rain and they had to park a long ways away, they would walk around the outside of the building in order to enter through that door. One time I asked them why they didn’t come through the back door, closer to where they had parked their car. They told me it was because they had a longstanding feud with some of their extended family that also attended the church. That family always came through the back door and they used the front door, in order that they would never have to run into each other face to face. As they were telling me this story, the woman confessed that that the rift between the families went back to the previous generation, and she didn’t really know what it was about. Nevertheless, she was not going to talk to the members of that family, even though there was nothing personal between them.

For the brothers of Joseph the accumulation of bad blood surely extended at least back to his father Jacob. Joseph was favored in part because he was the favorite son of Jacob’s favorite wife, Rachel. All this favoritism, reaching back at least one generation, no doubt formed the foundation for the resentment the other brothers must have felt for Joseph.

Sometimes we inherit resentments, or bad behaviors, inability to reconcile and even out and out anger, from the families into which we are born. We are born under piles and piles of baggage, and it is difficult if not impossible to get out from underneath it all.

Such is the fate of the entire Christian family. We are members of a family that inherited a great deal of baggage. We have added to that baggage, and not always been able to put aside the painful threads from the past that are intricately woven into our present.

What are we to do? Are we to just avoid going through the door that the people we hate use for the rest of our lives so we don’t have to face them? Is it okay to live with anger, hatred, and generations of resentment in our hearts? Do we imagine that we can go on living our lives as if we are normal people while continuing to cling steadfastly to our unresolved conflicts from the past? Does cutting people off enable us to live in peace? Or are we called, no, are we REQUIRED, to live by a different way?

Come back next week, as find a word of HOPE at the end of Genesis.

**Epistle Track: Discipleship 101 with the Romans**

**Romans 10:5-15**

I live in a part of the country where when driving down any given road or interstate one is likely to come upon one or more signs which convey a message similar to this:



I called the number and it took me to a company known as “Gospel Billboards.” The mission of Gospel Billboards is to point America to Christ. They offer spiritual counseling via the telephone by connecting callers to Bible-believing churches. They also maintain a website where they provide Biblical answers to questions about eternal life, abortion, addiction, heaven and hell, and homosexuality, to name just a few. They believe that believing in Jesus is the only way to heaven, and all who do not believe in him and confess him as their Lord and Savior will go to hell. They also appear to assume that confessing Jesus Christ as Lord means ascribing to a certain interpretation of scripture and drawing conclusions with which everyone may or may not agree. I didn’t confirm it, but I would suspect that United Methodists are not on their list of “Bible-believing churches.”

For these folks the task of evangelism is to save people by urging them to confess Christ as their Lord. How is this accomplished? By convincing people to “confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved (Romans 10:9-10, NRSV). Once this has been done, individuals are saved and they “know where they going when they die.” That seems to be the end of it.

There is nothing wrong with sharing faith in this way just as long as we are clear that when we offer people Christ it is not *our* actions that save them, but God’s.

Furthermore, as United Methodists, our evangelical task tells us that there is more to discipleship than eliciting the right words from a non-believer. Saying those words is important, but for Methodists the words are only the first step in the lifelong journey towards Christian perfection. We are not saved so much as we ARE BEING saved, every moment that we practice the ways of Jesus and grow in Christian Discipleship.

Henry H. Knight III and Douglas Powe, Jr. write in *Transforming Evangelism: The Wesleyan Way of Sharing Faith:*

Part of the difficulty is how people understand what it means to evangelize. Many may envision it as confronting individuals with an argument for the gospel and an urgent call for decision. Whether they make an immediate decision for Christ determines whether they are “saved” or “lost.” Either way, evangelism with them is done, and it is time to move on to the next person. We believe evangelism is more relational than confrontational, more communal than solidarity, and more a beginning point than an end. Evangelism involves not only sharing our faith with others, but also welcoming them into a community and enabling them to begin go grow in their faith. Above all, evangelism is about love: God’s love for us in Jesus, our love for our neighbor, and the invitation to receive and grow in a new life that is characterized by love.

For Methodists, evangelism is about conversion that leads to transformation and committed discipleship. Perhaps this text might serve as a springboard for your congregation to begin re-thinking its view of evangelism and its relationship to Christian Discipleship. Not sure where to begin? Contact Rev. Heather Heinzman Lear (hlear@gbod.org), Director of Evangelism Ministries at the GBOD, and check out her recent article on Discipleship and Evangelism at <http://umcconnections.org/2014/01/13/commentary-christian-discipleship-requires-evangelism/>.

**Gospel Track: Jesus and the Disciples in the Mission Field**

**Matthew 14:22-33**

Like last week, once again we find Jesus in need of some alone time for spiritual renewal. He has not yet managed to take a break in order to deal with his own need to grieve the loss of his friend and cousin John the Baptist. Matthew tells us that he dismissed the crowds, sent the disciples on ahead in a boat, and went up on a mountain alone to spend some time in prayer and reflection.

Unfortunately, just as quickly as his break had come it came to a screeching halt, because in his absence his disciples got themselves into a bit of a mess. The small craft they had taken to cross the Sea of Galilee had gotten caught up in a terrible storm, and apparently they were not able to navigate themselves out of harm’s way.

In the middle of this crisis they spotted Jesus walking towards them on the water. Frightened and stunned, they imagine they were seeing things. But then he spoke to Peter, inviting him to step out in faith, and to not be afraid of the swirling waters that threatened to destroy their boat and swallow up their very lives.

Douglas Wingeier, writing in *Keeping Holy Time, Year A*, offers a helpful observation as we consider how to interpret this story. He writes,

The disciples were in the midst of a dark and scary chaos. It did not look good—such a great storm and such a fragile boat.

For Matthew and his readers, this was a powerful story. The church has often been portrayed as a boat, tossed to and fro in a stormy world. The first Christians had experienced the tumult of the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, and the storms of oppression and persecution surrounding that. The early church, too, was a small craft trying to carry Christ’s commission in a hostile world, and it seemed they made such little progress (Wingeier, 77).

Disciples in the mission field today, no less than those first disciples, find themselves in the midst of the dark and scary chaos of trying to share faith in a world that is increasingly hostile to not only the Christian faith, but to all faith traditions. We may not be facing government sanctioned oppression and persecution for proclaiming the Christian faith, but there can be little doubt that our ship is getting smaller, with fewer and fewer people on board who are trying to carry Christ’s commission into our world. It just doesn’t seem like we are making much progress.

Recently I have been reading Alan J. Roxburgh’s book, *Missional: Joining God in the Neighborhood* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011). Roxburgh’s contention is that the church’s main failure today is its inability to adapt to the radically changed culture in which we now live. What is this radical change? Roxburgh describes it this way:

Something is happening and it’s not just generational Christians are giving up on the church they have known. They feel adrift, having come to the conclusion that it’s impossible to find a place to practice the Christian life, except in small house or simple churches that gather informally across the city. We have entered an unthinkable world where we need a different kind of church (Roxburgh, 15).

Roxburgh believes that the models of success that the church has upheld for the last two generations are no longer useful, particularly the models created by the “seeker” churches that have grown into the mega churches we’ve seen develop in the past thirty years. He does not believe that large churches offering programs and feel-good messages are going to last. Building attractional programs in order to meet the needs of church shoppers is not a strategy that will reach the rising generation.

As I read and considered Roxburgh’s words I couldn’t help but think about my two sons, who are ages nineteen and twenty three, as well as the teenagers I teach in Sunday School every week at the local church I attend. When I talk to these young people I am continually struck by their near-obsession with dystopian novels, movies, and video games. Why are they drawn to these stories? Because, as they have told me, these stories help them to image a worst case scenario for the future. In doing so, they can begin to think about how they will deal with the crises that lie ahead of them.

Many young adults simply cannot envision a future that in any way resembles the lifestyles that previous generations have enjoyed. They imagine a life defined by struggling to find work, and having difficulty making ends meet economically. They worry about the health of the planet and climate change. They imagine the near total destruction of the planet as previous generations have known it, and they don’t understand why the church is forever squabbling over matters they see as largely unimportant.

When I consider them, and put their thoughts in conversation with Roxburgh’s call upon the church to put the Gospel in dialogue with the real world we all live in, I can see how what he says makes sense. My sons have written the church off as irrelevant. They do not think the church has any interest in trying to address the very real problems that concern them. They think the church has nothing to offer, because the church is not engaging the world in a way that they find useful or transformational.

Roxburgh suggests that the fundamental shift that the church needs to be making as lit lives into this future is to focus in on serving the needs of the people in local communities. To do that, we need to be asking a completely different set of questions from the ones that have been asked by previous generations. Instead of developing a target audience and building programs to attract that audience to our churches, the two primary questions the church needs to be asking today are:

* What is God up to in my neighborhood and community?
* How can we join with what God is already doing in those places (Roxburgh, 22)?

Roxburgh says that we are only in the very early stages of figuring out how to be in ministry in this new world we live in. We’ve got a long ways to go, and the winds of change and turbulent waters of the postmodern shift are tossing us all about. It is no wonder so many congregations are afraid for their futures! It is no wonder denominational leaders are yelling at each other across lines of theological difference! We are like those disciples on the boat. We are scared for our very lives. Our boat is sinking and for some reason, we have lost our faith that Jesus is still out there, and he is not going to abandon us and leave us alone to sink or swim.

Making these shifts is going to require great bravery: bravery on the scale of Peter. It is not going to be easy to let go of the methods that we have relied on for so long. It is not going to be easy to trust that Jesus is really standing there, holding out his hand and encouraging us to walk into this completely unknown and unchartered way of being in mission.

But we have to do it. We have to step out of the safety of what we have known and trusted. We have to stop depending on ourselves. We have to have faith to take big risks and radically trust in Jesus, just as those first disciples in mission field did.