

The Making of a Tribal People
A Sermon on Genesis 45:1-15
Proper 15
August 20, 2017

Introduction

This is our third and last Sunday in Genesis. Next week we begin ten weeks on Exodus.

Today I would like to give you a helicopter tour of what the Book of Genesis has to say about families. Families are the first group that humans are a part of.

I would like to look at what today's text has to tell us about the spiritual consciousness of being part of a group. How does the text help us build our spirituality?

First Move: Dysfunctional Families

The Book of Genesis is full of stories about dysfunctional families. Every character seems to be looking out for themselves.

Abraham, the father of faith, pretends when he is traveling in Egypt that his wife Sarah is his sister because she is beautiful and he is afraid that the Pharaoh will desire her and want to kill Abraham. It doesn't seem to bother Abraham that Pharaoh may take her as a wife.

Every family in Genesis has sibling rivalry, starting with Cain and Abel. Abraham sends his first-born son, Ishmael, into the desert because Sarah is jealous and wants the inheritance to go to her son, Isaac, who is Abraham's second son. Rabbi Vered Harris told us two weeks ago about the rivalry between Isaac's two sons, Esau and Jacob, and how Jacob, with help from his mother, Rebekah, deceived his father, Isaac, into giving Jacob the blessing that he intended to give to Esau as the first-born son. Vered said that one line of rabbinic interpretation is that Jacob was changed by wrestling all night with the stranger. I am not so sure. The next day, when Jacob met his brother Esau for the first time since stealing his blessing, Jacob still feared Esau even though Esau embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed. Jacob refused Esau's offer to journey together. Jacob wanted to get away from Esau.

Jacob's sons are violent. The prince of the Hittites seized their sister Dinah and lay with her by force, but he was drawn to her. He loved her and spoke tenderly to her. He asked for her hand in marriage. Jacob's sons were outraged, but the king

offered to give Jacob and his sons part of their land and asked them to live with them. Jacob's sons said that they could not agree to the offer unless the king and all the people of the city were circumcised. Jacob's sons deceived the Hittites. After they were circumcised and while they were still sore, they slaughtered the Hittites.

These are our ancestors in faith. Jacob's sons are the namesakes of the 12 Tribes of Israel.

Mary talked last week about Joseph and his brothers. Joseph was full of himself. He dreamed that he would rule over his brothers and that they would bow down to him. He was foolish enough to tell his brothers about the dreams. His brothers again were violent. They intended to kill Joseph by throwing him into a pit. Instead they sold him to traders who took him to Egypt.

Deception is a family trait. The brothers deceived Jacob by smearing Joseph's many-colored robe in goat's blood and telling Jacob that he was torn apart by wild animals.

Second Move: The Education of Two Tzaddiks

Today's text is an encounter between Judah and Joseph. It is ten years later. Judah and Joseph have changed during that time. Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Prize winner, describes this change in Joseph's character as *The Education of a Tzaddik*, which is Jewish for a righteous man. I believe that the change in Judah also can be described as the education of a tzaddik.

Let us start with Judah, since his story is less well known. Judah is the fourth brother. He shows some family consciousness when the brothers throw Joseph in the pit. He also displays greed. Judah says, "He is our brother, our own flesh. Let us sell him and profit from him instead of killing him." Judah talks his brothers into taking Joseph out of the pit and selling him to Midianite traders who were passing by.

We learn more about Judah in Genesis 38. Judah marries a Canaanite woman and has three sons. His oldest son dies, leaving his widow Tamar childless. Judah asks his second son to marry Tamar and have children with her. The second son married Tamar but spilled his seed on the ground. God puts him to death. Judah promises Tamar that when the youngest son comes of age, he will marry her. The years pass and Judah does not keep his word. Tamar tricks Judah, dressing as a prostitute and sitting by a road where she knows Judah will pass. Judah promises to give her a goat as payment. Tamar asks for Judah to give her his seal, cord and staff as collateral until she receives the goat. Judah sleeps with Tamar and she gets pregnant. Three months later, when Judah finds out that Tamar is pregnant, still unaware that she was in disguise, he orders her to be killed. Tamar sends Judah his

seal, cord and staff and tells him that she was made pregnant by the man who owned these things. Judah is shocked. The first step in his education is that he realizes that he has wronged her. He courageously admits to all the townspeople, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my youngest son.”

Now let us turn to the education of Joseph. When Joseph is taken to Egypt, he is purchased by Potiphar, Pharaoh’s chief steward. Potiphar sees that Joseph has wisdom as a manager, so he appoints him to run his household. The Lord blessed Potiphar’s house for Joseph’s sake, and his riches grew. Joseph is tempted by Potiphar’s wife. She is attracted to Joseph and says, “Lie with me.” Joseph shows integrity by refusing to lie with her, even when no one else is in the house. For showing loyalty to Potiphar, rabbinic commentaries said that Joseph has become a tzaddik. Harvey Fields, a Torah scholar, says that Joseph earned the title of tzaddik. He was not born to it. He becomes a righteous man through his struggles with temptation, greed and selfishness. This is a turning point in his life.

Potiphar’s wife does not care about Joseph’s righteousness. She feels shame. She lies and tells Potiphar that Joseph tried to seduce her. Potiphar throws Joseph into prison.

Joseph’s loyalty and morality are ultimately rewarded. While in prison, Joseph impresses the warden with his managerial skill. The warden puts him in charge of all the prisoners. Later, the Pharaoh hears about Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams. Joseph does not claim credit for this ability; he tells Pharaoh that God is interpreting the dreams through him. Joseph interprets the dreams to mean that Egypt will enjoy seven years of plenty, followed by seven years of famine. Joseph advises Pharaoh to take 1/5 of the grain harvested during each of the seven years of plenty and put the grain in storehouses. The grain will be a reserve for the seven years of famine. Pharaoh praises Joseph for his wisdom and appoints him to oversee the storage of grain, making him the second most powerful man in Egypt after Pharaoh.

When the famine comes, it extends into Canaan. Jacob sends his ten sons, all except the youngest Benjamin, to Egypt. Joseph recognizes his brothers but they don’t recognize him. Joseph is deceptive and manipulative—he accuses his brothers of spying on the nakedness of the land. They tell him that they have come to buy grain and that they have an elderly father and a younger brother. Joseph seizes Simeon, the oldest, and tells the brothers that he will not release him until they return with the youngest brother. The brothers agree, but they ask themselves whether they are paying a penalty for what they did to Joseph—they saw his anguish when he pleaded but they did not listen. They were speaking to each other in Hebrew and did not know that Joseph could understand them since he had spoken to them through an

interpreter. Joseph turns away from them and weeps. He takes their money in exchange for sacks of food. He gives orders to put their money to return each man's money to his sack and to give them provisions for their journey.

When the brothers return to Canaan, Jacob refuses to allow Benjamin to go back with them to Egypt. After two years pass and they eat all the grain, Jacob tells them to go back to Egypt. Judah stands up to his father and says that the ruler in Egypt had warned them not to return without the younger brother or they would all die. Judah tells Jacob, "Send the boy with me. I myself will be surety for him. You can hold me accountable for him. If I do not bring him back, then let me bear the blame forever."

When the brothers return to Egypt, Joseph frees Simeon and invites the brothers to a banquet in his home. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he hurries out of the room because he is overcome with affection for his brother and is about to weep.

When the banquet is over, he orders that the bags of his brothers be filled with food and that his wine cup be secretly placed in Benjamin's bag. After the brothers depart, Joseph sends his steward to arrest them for stealing his wine cup. When the wine cup is found in Benjamin's bag, the brothers are brought back to Joseph's house. He tells them that he will keep Benjamin as a slave but release the rest of them.

Third Move: Brothers Make Peace

That brings us to today's text, the confrontation between Judah and Joseph. Judah pleads for Benjamin's release. It is the longest speech in Genesis. Judah says that their father Jacob will die if they do not bring Benjamin home with them. Judah offers to stay himself as a slave instead of Benjamin. He says he fears to see the suffering that would come upon his father if he returns without Benjamin.

Judah is deferential in this speech. He uses the word *servant* 12 times, referring to himself, his brothers and his father as Joseph's servants.

Judah uses the word *father* 15 times. Jewish commentator Nehama Leibowitz says that the repetition is not accidental. It "is calculated to arouse compassion in the hardest of hearts, appealing to the most elemental of passions—parental love." He hopes that his plea for justice might touch the heart of Joseph, who still has not identified himself to his brothers, evoking the sense of pain that the loss of a child might bring to a parent.

It works. Joseph cannot control himself. He sends everyone out of the room. He wants to talk only to his brothers, whom he now recognizes as his family. Judah has demonstrated his love for his family, that he will treat his youngest brother

Benjamin different from the way he treated Joseph. Joseph weeps so loudly that the Egyptians in the next room can hear it.

Joseph ends the deception and reveals himself to his brothers. “I am Joseph. Is my father still alive?” This is a strange question. Judah has been pleading with him to release Benjamin for the sake of his father. Joseph may be showing his feelings for Jacob. “Is my father *really* still alive?”

Then he reaches out to his brothers. “Come closer to me. I am your brother Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt.” And the brothers draw closer.

He offers words of reconciliation and forgiveness. “Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves.” This implies that Joseph is not angry with them.

“God sent me before you to preserve life.” God is present, even in the midst of dysfunction.

Joseph asks his brothers to bring Jacob to him so that the whole family can be together again. He asks the brothers to move their whole families to the land of Goshen. The key words in Joseph’s speech are: “You shall be near me, you and your children and your children’s children, as well as your flocks, your herds, and all that you have.”

Joseph tells his brothers that he will provide for them. There will be five more years of famine but “you and your household, and all that you have, will not come to poverty.”

Joseph is again overcome by emotion. He shows affection for his brothers. He falls upon Benjamin’s neck and weeps, and Benjamin weeps upon Joseph’s neck. Joseph kisses all his brothers and weeps upon them.

The last line of the text: “His brothers talked with him.” This is a reference to last week’s text. When Jacob gave Joseph the multi-colored robe, his brothers hated him and could not speak to him in peace.

The reconciliation is not complete. The brothers still don’t entirely trust Joseph. When Jacob dies in Genesis 50, the brothers fear that Joseph will seek revenge. They ask Joseph to forgive them. They weep and fall down before him. Joseph assures them that he will not harm them.

Fourth Move: The True Purpose of Religion

Jim Marion, a Catholic mystic, has written a book called *Putting on the Mind of Christ: The Inner Work of Christian Spirituality*. He says that the only essential purpose of religion is to accelerate growth in consciousness. He feels pretty strongly about it:

People do not need religion to develop laws or ethical approaches to problems. Legislatures, courts and ethical experts, drawn from various professions, can do that. Nor do they need religion to operate hospitals, soup kitchens, schools and social welfare programs. Government and private charities can do that. . . .

What people need religion for is to *accelerate* growth in consciousness, to speed up our normal snail's pace growth in spiritual awareness. All the "technologies" of the Christian religion, the New Testament, prayer, Bible study, preaching, fasting, music, Holy Communion or Mass, . . ., have only one purpose—to accelerate people's growth in consciousness upwards and eventually into the nondual vision of Jesus' kingdom.

Today's text is about the formation of a tribal consciousness. Tribalism is a shallow level of consciousness but it is a necessary first step toward group formation. The social values of loyalty, authority and purity emerge at this level of consciousness.

To this point in Genesis, we have had stories about families that do not get along. The reconciliation of Joseph and his brothers begins the formation of the first authentic family. That makes larger groups possible. The family stories in Genesis give way to the emergence of the Hebrew people as a nation in Exodus.

The early church in the New Testament grows out of a sense of family. Jesus asks, "Who are my mother and my brother and my sister? Whoever does the will of God is my mother and my brother and my sister." A new family is formed around Christ. We are brothers and sisters in Christ.

A tribal consciousness is a necessary first step, but there are many stages of group development beyond that. The white supremacists in Charlottesville have a tribal consciousness. They are bound together by their sense of identity as white European Americans. That is one reason that I despair about overcoming their racism and their hostility to immigrants and Muslims. They have a shallow level of consciousness. Raising their level of consciousness is hard work. Resisting them and shaming them will only repress their public display of racism and drive them into hiding. The problem will continue to fester.

Tribalism is a good thing; we just need to go beyond that in our spiritual journey. Remember the teaching of our friend, Richard Rohr, the Franciscan priest who writes prolifically on spirituality. All higher levels of consciousness include the levels below. Tribalism starts with loving those in your family. That still enriches us.

We live in a fragmented society. People feel isolated. Families are scattered all across the country as people move where the jobs are. Lifetime security at the workplace is a thing of the past. People no longer expect to work at the same company for 40 years. Longtime bonds with co-workers are increasingly rare. People come home from work and spend all their time inside. They don't know their neighbors. Fewer and fewer people are going to church.

People have gotten tribal about politics. Politics is one of the few things that gives them a sense of group identity. They can be part of a group from the comfort of their homes. Loyalty to the group has become a preeminent value. People who belong to other political groups have become the other.

This is what Jim Marion means when he says that the essential purpose of religion is to accelerate growth in consciousness. Tribalism promotes bonding within the group, but it leads to conflicts with other groups.

Bible stories help with that. Judah and Joseph show spiritual growth. Judah is capable of transcending his own interests. He recognizes that he has wronged Tamar and publicly admits his mistake. Joseph toys with his brothers and accuses them of being spies. He threatens to put them all in jail or kill them. Vengeance is on his mind. He is moved by the self-giving of Judah, who offers to stay as a slave in place of Benjamin because he does not want to bring suffering to his father.

Conclusion

Judah is the hero of today's story, even more than Joseph. He shows the highest level of consciousness of any person in Genesis. His self-giving creates the first authentic family among our ancestors in faith.

Jacob recognizes this with a blessing from his deathbed. He has blessings for all his sons but gives the greatest blessing to Judah. He compares Judah to a lion. The scepter shall not depart from his hand nor the ruler's staff from between his feet. Judah's line will become the dominant tribe in the southern kingdom of Israel. King David is born of Judah's line. Jesus of Nazareth is born of Judah's line.

Judah is one of our ancestors in faith. As a young man, he betrayed his brother Joseph and sold him for profit. He grew out of it. May his example help us grow beyond a tribal consciousness.