

Favored Son, Hated Brother

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28

Romans 10:5-15

The last time I was up here, I spoke to you about Jacob and the troubles he encountered with his Uncle Laban. That story revealed a family steeped in dysfunction: favoritism, deceit, trickery, all are “normal” within the family of Laban and his sister, Rebecca, Jacob’s mother. And almost as if it were meant to prove the idiom, “Children learn what they live”, the story of deceit and treachery continues with the children of Jacob and his wives.

We pick up the story with 17-year-old Joseph being sent to check on his brothers. Having given a bad report of his brothers to their father in the past, even though these brothers were the “lesser brothers”, being the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, it’s likely that *all* the brothers had a problem with the “snitch” in the family. Perhaps Jacob thought things had blown over by now and it would be okay for Joseph to go on a journey of several days to see what the others were up to. Apparently, he had not taken notice of how his gift to Joseph of a beautiful coat, one that might be given to a first-born son, had rankled the others.

There’s that first-born thing again! Remember that Jacob had stolen the birthright and blessing of his elder brother Esau, leading him to his Uncle Laban in the first place. Then there was the incident of Laban giving his first-born daughter, Leah, in marriage before her sister, even though Rachel was the one that Jacob had labored seven years to marry.

Back to our story! As if Jacob’s favoritism wasn’t enough and ratting out his brothers didn’t earn him any warm fuzzies with them, in between verses 4 and 12

Joseph shares two dreams with his brothers and his father. In his dreams all of them are bowing down to him – the little brother, almost the baby of the brood. Jacob scolds Joseph for his brashness, but at the same time, Jacob “kept the matter in mind.” Sounds a little like something we would learn later about Mary when the shepherds visited and ¹⁹ ...Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. Luke 2:19 (NIV2011)

Perhaps Jacob was remembering a dream he had when he was on his way to Paddan Aram. The dream of angels on a staircase and God promising him “I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. ¹⁴ Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring.” (Gen. 28:13-14) And God had kept his promise, the continuation of the promise made to his grandfather Abraham. Jacob and his large family were now settled in the land God had promised him. Perhaps that promise made him less careful about sending Joseph to his brothers, out of his watchful sight.

We don't know what behaviors Joseph had reported about his brother's in the past, but I can't imagine they were as bad as the behavior they were planning when they spied Joseph coming up the road. Murder was in their hearts! Well maybe it could be as bad as what they were thinking, having already killed all the men in Shechem in retribution of the rape of their sister, Dinah. This was a tough bunch of boys! Without dad watching over them they would have the opportunity to rid themselves of this pesky, “better than the rest of you” little brother.

Fortunately, the eldest brother, Reuben, the one with the most to lose to Joseph, caught wind of their plan and convinced them to not to kill him, planning to rescue his younger brother when the others weren't around and perhaps win favor with

their father. So instead the brothers lowered Joseph into a cistern, content to let him die a slow death, then sat down to eat lunch! I'm not sure which would be more callous, killing him outright or leaving him in a cistern to waste away. As fate would have it, a caravan of traders just happened along then, and Judah got the great idea to profit over the loss of his brother and made hasty plans to sell Joseph to the travelers, getting the market price for a young slave. Now, imagine Reuben's shock when he returned to find Joseph gone!

What a family! Not a whole lot of brotherly love going on. You would think things would be running smoothly by now. Jacob was settled in Canaan, the land that had been promised to Abraham. With 12 sons and several daughters we see the beginning of the nations that God promised Abraham would come from him. But the generations of dysfunction that have brought Jacob's family to this point are too strong to just quit.

Jacob continues the family practice of favoritism. The favoritism that cast Ishmael out of Abraham's camp. The favoritism that caused Rebecca to counsel Jacob to steal the blessing meant for Esau. The brothers continue the family tradition of deceit when they plot to kill their brother and to make it look like an accident. Deceit that started with Jacob pretending to be Esau. Laban's deceit in substituting Leah for Rachel. Jacob's continued deceit by breeding sturdy, but "blemished" livestock and thus building his fortune at his uncle's expense. The sons of Jacob are only living what they have learned by watching the other adults in their lives. That's the way it is with generational sin. One generation learns from the one before and so on down the line. Before you know it, sin is normal and socially acceptable behavior seems abhorrent.

We experienced some of this when Kenny and Lisai came home to us. Lisai was really out of sorts one day, just angry at Rod. When I asked her why, she told me she thought it was terrible that Rod left the house all day, every day. She was sure it was because he just didn't want to be around her. It never occurred to her that people go to work to earn money for things like food, clothing, and housing!

When you are raised by people in the throes of addiction, and everyone else around you are locked into the same lifestyle, life looks quite different from what others experience. It is a struggle to overcome what has become second nature to you.

The only hope for change is for someone to decide that they are not going to continue on the same path as the rest of the family. That's a great start, but not so easily accomplished. Family systems can be very resistant to change, just as societies can be resistant to change. Societies are like family systems on a much larger scale.

Jesus found himself in the same boat as Joseph, not well liked by those who were resistant to making a change in the system. Joseph saw himself being elevated above his family members in his dreams but was brought low by those who resisted him. Jesus, who is elevated above all of us, tried to change the society of his day and met massive resistance. We are still experiencing resistance to change today.

Even after almost 250 as a nation, we are still resistant to change. I was recently reading an article about immigrants and this is what it said:

The refugees seeking haven in America were poor and disease-ridden. They threatened to take jobs away from Americans and strain welfare budgets. They practiced an alien religion and pledged

allegiance to a foreign leader. They were bringing with them crime. They were accused of being rapists.

And, worst of all, these undesirables were Irish. (history.com when-america-despised-the-irish-the-19th-centurys-refugee-crisis)

Words like these penned about the 1845 arrival of the Irish have been spoken about those seeking a new life in America in the 21st century.

In the mid-1800's due to the potato famine in Ireland, millions of poor and starving Irish men, women, and children fled to America. This meant a change to the society that had developed from the early settlers of the colonies. In the 200 years that preceded the influx of Irish, the Americans had developed a belief system that said Protestants were good and Catholics were bad. Despite having settled in the colonies to flee religious persecution themselves, these "native" Americans persecuted the Irish because of their religion – they were Catholic. It would take much strife to break through that societal system. How sad that so many who claimed to follow Jesus, could not accept what Paul writes to the Romans:

Romans 10:11-13 (NIV2011)

¹¹ As Scripture says, "Anyone who believes in him will never be put to shame." ¹² For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him,

¹³ for, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

Jesus *is* Lord of all. There is a sufficiency in Christ that negates the need for the envy and deceit that leads to generational sin, both within families and within society. Much strife and hardship can be overcome by focusing on that fact. There is no favoritism in Jesus. There is no need for deceit and trickery, since all are

welcome, and all are equal in His sight. The dysfunction of our families and our societies will fade when we practice what Jesus has taught us. Unfortunately, not everyone in our families or societies have heard what Jesus has taught. Many have heard of Jesus, but not all KNOW Jesus. Paul continues:

Romans 10:14-15 (NIV2011)

¹⁴ How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? ¹⁵ And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

We, as believers, are being sent into the world to help bring healing to the human family. We are the ones being sent with a message of good news, the good news of the sufficiency of Christ. News that will bring changes, changes that many will resist, but changes that are sorely needed for the good of all mankind. Following God’s favored son, we are called to work against hatred among our brothers. Today we pray God’s blessing on us that we may be strengthened for the task.
AMEN

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