



The Shalom of the Brothers

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given August 13, 2017

Genesis 37:1-28, Proper 14A

As I think I've shared with all of you in the past, I grew up in a different expression of Christianity than this one, and as happens with many people when they come of age, I left church and Christian faith for quite a long time. When I discovered I could experience a transformative spirituality from an orthodox Christian perspective that was both faithful and much more expansive than the one I had grown up with, I embraced Christian faith again. And quite soon after that, I found myself in seminary, where the first class I took was Pentateuch, what our Jewish brothers and sisters call the Torah – the first five books of the Bible, beginning with Genesis, which is where one of the texts from this morning comes from. So in this class after a long absence, I found myself again reading the stories of Genesis, beginning with the creation of the world and continuing with the call of Abraham and Sarah, and their children and grandchildren and great grandchildren. And I remember reading these stories for seminary, and thinking, simply, these tales are bleak. These are stories that mimic soap operas with their drama and intrigue and violence, but they are in some ways less satisfying because they don't tie up with a neat bow. I wasn't sure what to make of these stories.

What I have come to understand about the book of Genesis is that among other things, it is a story and a continuing conversation about brothers. It begins with the story of Cain and Abel, and Cain murdering Abel out of jealousy and a sense of not being in God's favor. It continues with the story of Isaac and Ishmael, Ishmael who never had a chance because he was the child of Abraham's slave woman Hagar, and who was banished from the family when Isaac came of age. It continues with the twins of

Jacob and Esau, Jacob who deceives Esau and essentially steals his birthright, and who is a fugitive for more than twenty years as a result. Jacob and Esau are the first brothers who finally reconcile with each other, but their past conflict is too painful and ingrained for them to live near each other. And the story continues with the one we read today, the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers who hate him and cannot speak peaceably to them because their father loves him best, so they sell him as a slave to Egypt.

Now when I hear the word brothers, I generally don't think of quite as much conflict as Genesis portrays. I generally think of family, of those close to me, where things generally are good, as opposed to the world out there, where things like yesterday's violent white supremacist rally in Charlottesville and this week's saber rattling between North Korea and Donald Trump happen. But the first thing to realize about the story of brothers in Genesis is this. These stories remind us that the world is never simply about the good "us" versus the bad "them" out there, although it is important to name evil when it happens in us and in them, including the evil of white supremacy in our country which contradicts the love of God, which is increasing, and which must be resisted by people of faith. The stories about brothers in Genesis remind us that love and hate, good and evil, violence and redemption are always here, with us, within us as individuals and between brothers and sisters, in our families and our congregations and communities. But where is the good news in that? What hope do these stories offer us?

If we zero in to today's text from Genesis about Joseph and his brothers, and if you look very closely, you will see a thread that is different than any of the previous stories about brothers in the text of Genesis, and it is the clue that is the pivot point for the whole scriptural conversation about brothers. Joseph is with his father Jacob, wearing the famous coat that is sometimes described as multicolored or technicolored dreamcoat like the musical says, or the coat with long sleeves. Whatever it was, it was special, and Joseph was the only one who had it. I think we can sympathize with both Joseph and his brothers because their father played favorites, and it's no fun for anyone when that happens. But something curious happens in

today's text. Jacob sends his son Joseph to the brothers, to see if it is well with them, the text in English says. But in Hebrew, the text says that Jacob sent Joseph to his brothers to see to their shalom. Shalom in Hebrew means peace, but it means much more than that. It means a holistic and communal wellbeing of body, mind and spirit. It might be equally translated, go see to the wholeness of your brothers.

So Joseph is being sent to the brothers who hate him, to see to their wholeness, their wellbeing, their shalom. The conflict is already well established, but Joseph is given a new and challenging mission. And he accepts it. And this is the hinge point of Genesis, where stories that had been bleak become stories that have hope.

Some of you will be familiar with how the story about Joseph and his brother evolves in the succeeding chapters of Genesis, and I don't necessarily want to give it away because next week's lectionary includes the climax of the story and I have no idea if Tom will choose to preach that text or not. I do encourage you all to go home and read Genesis 37-50 to see what happens, because it's complex and strange and beautiful. I won't tell you how, but Joseph does end up being able to see to the shalom of his brothers and indeed to the whole world, after a long and very difficult journey. This is the first story of brothers in Genesis that has a satisfying reconciliation, and it starts with Joseph's willingness to accept his father's charge to go on a journey of seeing to the shalom of his brothers, the brothers who hate him. This theme is echoed later in scripture in the Hebrew prophets, where in Jeremiah the exiled people of Israel are told to seek the shalom of the cities where they are in exile and where they have been carried away as slaves.

We are called to seek the shalom, the welfare and wholeness, of the communities in which we live, including and especially those with whom we have conflict, even those who hate us and who have done us wrong. This does not in any way mean condoning violence, or being doormats, or saying it's OK when people do hateful bigoted things. It does mean that we are called to do the deep work of seeking wholeness for all, even when that puts us at risk, like it did for Joseph who was sold by his own brothers as a

slave. In the end, in the biblical imagination, there cannot be wholeness or shalom for one if there is not wholeness for all. We are all brothers and sisters, in a sense, because shalom rises and falls with all of us together or none of us.

As you face the events of this week, in your own family and in your neighborhood and in our country, what would it look like for you to seek the wholeness of those with whom you've been in conflict, especially those with whom you are especially connected? Wholeness might mean a loving invitation to face the truth and have the chance to leave previous patterns of hurtful behavior. Wholeness might mean something along the lines of the truth and reconciliation commissions in South Africa, where people had very difficult conversations where they had to see how their behavior and violence had impacted others. Wholeness might mean a willingness to see someone you have previously dismissed as worthless, as the complex human being they really are, with good and evil running through their hearts just as it does in yours. It might mean being willing to actually engage someone with whom you disagree, for the sake of inviting the best from that person, for the sake of inviting a healing transformation from that person. It might mean being willing to change our own perspectives where they are not loving as well. Shalom means many things, but the vision of God is for what Jewish scholars call *tikkun o'lam*, the restoration of all things, and what Christians call salvation, redemption in Christ from personal and systemic evil so that we might all live together, reflecting the image of God in which we were created.

This week, let us accept God's call to seek the shalom of our brothers and sisters. Amen.