

Sermon, Father William J. Albinger

August 10, 2008

Proper 14A - 2008

In the Name of our One Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

. In our readings today, we find two people who get themselves in trouble. Don't we all! The first is Joseph from our reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. In this story we not only start to end the history of the Patriarchs with Jacob – now named Israel – in Canaan, but we set the stage for the move to Egypt and the coming story of Moses.

Joseph gets in trouble for two reasons. The first is beyond his control; he is hated by his brothers simply for who he is. He is the son of Rachel, the beloved wife their father, and they are the sons of Leah, the hardworking first wife who is devoted but unloved. Not only that, but he is the spoiled child born late in life. We have seen that maybe in our own families. We grow up on short leashes with K-Mart hand-me-downs and hamburger helper and then along comes the prince born to older parents who seem to have forgotten all the rules and he grows up in Neiman Marcus eating lobster! Of course, being a tattler doesn't help him out either! The second reason is that he tells his brothers of two dreams he has had where the brothers and their parents bow down in deference to him. Tact is not his strong point!

His brothers conspire to kill him and we see two ethical responses to this. Reuben, knowing God's wrath is incited by the spilling of blood, convinces his brothers to throw Joseph into a pit intending to rescue him later and return him to the father. Judah, seeing a caravan of Ishmaelites coming, sees a compromise whereby

blood won't be spilled yet they still get can get rid of Joseph. They sell their brother into slavery for 20 pieces of silver and trick their father into believing that a wild animal killed and ate his beloved youngest son. Considering the father had stolen his own brother's birthright by tricking his own father, how ironic is that!

I told you last week that this is a dysfunctional family. Joseph is identified as the problem, but is he? Rabbi Friedman, in his book on family systems notes how in families and other groups the identified "problem" is either caused by or the collateral consequence of others being unable to deal with their own issues. Sometimes it is as simple as the focus being on a child who is depressed or acting out when in reality the parents are so focused on themselves and their careers or other interests that they simply cannot parent the child. Other times the source of dysfunction can be complex and go back generations, as we see here in the saga of the Patriarchs.

Reuben focuses on Joseph by wanting to save him and restore him to the father. Is he right? Well, the boy's life would be saved but nothing changes and the same hatreds continue. Judah sees an opportunity for compromise. They can get rid of Joseph by selling him into slavery and telling a lie to cover it up. Is this the best possible solution given the circumstances? Killing is avoided and Joseph is put outside the family never to be seen again. The old man will cry a little, but then things will settle down. But has anything really changed in this family even with Joseph out of sight? Wouldn't the underlying problems just show up in a different way?

Sometimes the issue is larger than one family. I think of our country's history of slavery and the distorted sense of "race" that grew out of the institution of slavery. Not only was a distorted theory of supposed black inferiority created to justify slavery, but an equally delusional theory of white superiority and justified privilege also arose

as a sometimes unintentional and sometimes intentional corollary. This sense of white superiority was insidious because it could and has been applied to any group who is different from “white” or whatever other category is defined as being superior and, thus, justifiably privileged.

Reuben’s heart may have been in the right place, but would anything really have changed? Getting rid of the alleged problem doesn’t seem to work either, be it selling Joseph for 20 pieces of silver into slavery or segregation and Jim Crow laws or, as I think we will discover in our Anglican Communion, any moratoria on ordinations or blessing people’s lives and committed loving relationships.

So what does work? I think our Gospel lesson point to an answer. In the story of the storm at sea, and in the shallow Sea of Galilee very violent storms can happen suddenly, terror and fear overtook the disciples. It wasn’t the healthy kind of fear that alerts one to danger and to possible action, but the paralyzing fear focusing solely on the moment and the self. Into this moment comes Jesus telling them to “Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.” Peter tests this situation to see if it is an apparition or truly the Lord. When Jesus tells him to “Come”, Peter’s focus is solely on Jesus and he steps out of the boat. It is only when he shifts his focus from Jesus to the wind that he starts to sink. Even then he cries for help. “Lord, save me!” he cries his focus again on Jesus and Jesus immediately reached out his hand.

Only Peter got out of the boat at Jesus’ command. I think our instinct in time of peril is the status quo – return Joseph to his father or stay in the boat. Most of us would be in that boat bailing like crazy until the water was up to the gunwales. But that won’t change anything. Sometimes the real problem isn’t the storm, but us. Sometimes we are the problem and we have to change. That can be so hard that we

can't do it alone. Like Peter there are situations in life where we have to step out of the boat – and we can only do that in reliance on God's presence and care. I don't think many of us have been in a sinking boat at sea, but I think all of have been in seemingly hopeless situations where we don't have the answer and are part of the problem – troubled personal relationships, unfulfilling jobs or careers, being victimized or discriminated against, financial problems – you name it.

So here are some practical walking lessons for those times when we have to get out of the boat or sink:

1. Know we cannot do it alone – have faith that God is there with us. We don't need a lot; a little bit of faith got Peter out of the boat and in Jesus' hand.

2. We learn faith by doing faith. All our thinking, good as it might be, won't change anything. At some point we have to step out of our lives and try something new – we have to act and see what happens.

3. Don't count on growing in faith, taking risks, changing and developing and being able to look good all the time. We may stumble. We may look foolish to those who want things to remain the way they are or who are risk adverse themselves. Jesus was viewed as disgraceful for touching the sick and eating with sinners. Sometimes we have to suffer being the fool in the eyes of others. I think of Mary Peabody.

Does anyone remember her? She grew up in a privileged Boston family, probably up in Prides Crossing or Manchester by the Sea and after college married a young clergyman and raised a nice family. But somewhere along the way, Mary came to understand that the Gospel and God's love wasn't all about Mary. She realized that being called a disciple meant working to bring God's Kingdom into the real world and that meant respecting the dignity of every human being. So as a woman in her 80's

she joined the civil right movement in the late 60s or early 70s and was arrested in St. Augustine, Florida during a civil rights march.

Mary got identified as a problem by those who arrested her and by the judge who sentenced her. You see, the young clergyman she married became the Episcopal Bishop of Massachusetts and one of the kids she raised, little Endicott, was now the Governor of Massachusetts! They couldn't wait to get Mary out of jail to solve their problem. She refused to be released from jail until all others arrested with her were also released. She looked foolish to many people at that time – all the more so because she was the wife of an Episcopal bishop and the mother of the Governor of Massachusetts. She didn't worry about appearances and she stepped out of the boat – and made a big splash – to the horror, I am sure of many bishops and their wives.

4. Finally, know that we have the unfailing support of God. We may not succeed right away and it may be hard to change but God is right there with us. As the Talmud says, "Every blade of grass has its angel who leans over it and whispers 'Grow! Grow.'" Paul says the same thing in Ephesians when he points out that God is able to do in us "far more than we can ask or imagine."

Amen.