

When All Seems Lost

Rev. Jeanne Santucci Murawski

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“A family is a web so delicately woven that it takes almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it’s woven of is as strong as anything on earth.”

This summer, we have been following the journey of Jacob in Genesis. Today, we move from the stories of Jacob himself, to the next generation of the promise.

God has promised land, descendants, and blessing, to the family of Abraham, yet in each generation, the promise is put in peril. From Abraham to Isaac, Isaac to Jacob, and now Jacob to Joseph, it seems that God’s plan for this family is constantly in danger of falling apart.

Whether the question is will there be children to pass the promise on to, or as it is here, which child will inherit the promise, there continues to be suffering and strife along the way.

If we named Jacob, Jacob the trickster, we might know Joseph as Joseph the dreamer. One of twelve brothers, and multiple sisters, Joseph is a bit of a tattletale. He is obviously his father’s favorite, despite Jacob’s own experiences with favoritism in his family of origin. You would think someone here would want to break the cycle. But it just isn’t to be. Jacob gives Joseph a fancy robe that sets him apart, and marks him as a target for his brothers’ anger.

If all of this this wasn’t enough, Joseph begins to dream some problematic dreams. In these visions, he imagines his brothers bowing down to him. He even dreams of his mother and father giving him special honor and praise as the brothers hail him as a hero.

Into this powder keg of jealousy and rage, Joseph blithely tosses match after match by running and telling his brothers each time he has a new vision of grandeur. I can just imagine them as he runs up in that flashy coat, thinking to themselves, here we go again.

We all have families. We all have family dynamics. And I’m sure it’s fairly easy for many of us to start comparing Jacob’s family to our own. This one is the favorite, that one is the tattletale, the other is the one with the temper, or whatever label we give each other at the reunions and picnics and get-togethers.

We complain when another seems to get more or better praise or gifts or recognition. We ask ourselves over and over, why him and not me?

Among Jacob's sons, the disappointment, the favoritism, and the hurt just got to be too much. The angry older brothers are out tending sheep in Shechem, an area where they were known to cause trouble, and had recently killed a man in response to perceived wrongs done to their sister Dinah.

It's there that young Joseph goes to find them, and the powder keg finally blows. The brothers have had enough. Let us kill the dreamer, and see what becomes of his dreams, they say.

The problem is, the dreams Joseph dreams are not just his own imaginings. They are visions of the future God has in store for his family and for the world. Joseph is destined to become a hero, saving the people of Israel from hunger and famine that will hit in just a few years. But the brothers don't know this. All they know is that they feel wronged, and just want things to go back to normal, before Joseph came along and stole their father's love from them.

What will become of the dreamer and his dreams?

What becomes of the dreamers in our time and our place?

This past week, I traveled with our youth mission team to Cincinnati, Ohio to work with inner city children living far below the poverty line. On August 21st, our youth will lead worship, and you'll have the chance to hear their reflections on the trip and what they've learned.

I don't want to jump the gun and tell any stories they might want to share at that service, but I will say that during the entire week, our eyes were opened to some of the realities and situations that we, for better or worse, often have the option to shield or protect ourselves from here in the Western suburbs.

Hunger. Violence. Physical and emotional neglect. These are just some of the issues the children we worked with deal with on a daily basis. And unlike our team, they don't have the luxury at the end of the week to pack up and head back home. They are home. This is their reality.

Each of our youth were paired with a child as a buddy for the week. One of our youth, after seeing the dilapidated door his buddy entered after leaving the bus at the end of the day commented, "I didn't think people actually lived in houses like

that. I thought those were things people invented in movies to show the family was poor, not that they actually existed.”

We heard story after story of family after family doing their best to pull themselves out of poverty, working hours and hours just to break even, and to give their children the best chance possible to break the cycle.

Of all the heartbreaking stories we heard, and saw, and experienced ourselves, one in particular has stayed in my mind. We brought the children to the local pool as a treat in the middle of the week. Due to a problem with the chlorine levels in the water, the kids weren't allowed to get in, just sit around the edges behind a yellow line, waiting in sweltering heat with no shade in sight. We waited and waited for the possibility that the pool's levels might even out and we'd get a chance to swim. We waited for three full hours, and eventually were asked to leave.

As we waited, I noticed a neighborhood boy who was not part of the program. He was there with some other children, monkeying around, hanging off the lifeguard stand, waiting for his chance to swim. I noticed his tousled dirty blond hair, and his profusion of freckles. As I watched, I also noticed his face all across his cheeks and the bridge of his nose was sunburned beyond belief. The skin had peeled away, revealing much lighter skin underneath that looked like it was receiving all new burns. I imagine he'll probably have scars.

I was filled with anger. Where were his parents? Why didn't he have sunblock? Why was he there by himself? Who was taking care of this boy?

I got my answer the next day. Walking back from another trip to the pool, this one far more successful, as the chlorine pump had been fixed, we came across a haunting scene. A man was dragging a red wagon piled high with bags filled to the brim with aluminum cans. He was obviously in a hurry, and as he hustled to a nearby dumpster, two little boys followed, picking up the cans that spilled from the sides. Just as they reached the dumpster, I assume to search for more cans, a bottom bag broke and spilled its contents across the field we were cutting through. Pick them up, pick them up, the man shouted, panicked.

The little boy with the burned cheeks was one of the sons, doing his best to pick up the cans that were to be turned into the recycling center before it closed for the day - yielding his family, what? A few dollars? For what? Hours of work scavenging?

Friends, these are people who we are talking about when we argue about welfare and entitlements. It's through government entitlement programs that

Washington UCC was able to provide daily breakfast and lunch, and a weekly dinner for their kids. Too often our politicians and policy makers try to make entitlements sound like undeserved benefits for those scamming the system when really we're talking about families just trying to make it through the day.

What are we each really entitled to? And what are we each required to share from our abundance? What does it truly mean, as we've been saying these past few weeks, to be blessed, to be a blessing?

The songwriter Bryan Serchio, writes:

Dream God's dream
Holy Spirit, help us dream...
Of a world where there is justice, and where everyone is free
To build and grow and love
And to simply have enough
The world will change when we dream God's dream

What happens to the dreamers in our time and places? What happens to the one who asks, why these children must live in such impossible circumstances? Are they celebrated for their visions of justice and equality, or do they end up like Joseph...betrayed and sold out?

Joseph had dreams of the day he would change the world, and his own family would thank him for saving their lives. When we dream God's dreams for our world, what visions do we see? This morning, as we share communion together, and participate in the Body of Christ through the broken bread and cup outpoured, I invite you to ask what God's dream is for yourself and for all the world. Because we are all one family of faith.

As Fredrick Beuchner reminds us, "A family is a web so delicately woven that it takes almost nothing to set the whole thing shuddering or even to tear it to pieces. Yet the thread it's woven of is as strong as anything on earth." Blessed be the ties that bind.

Amen.