

Sunday, August 21, 2011
Rev. Diane Monti-Catania

Sermon - "The Power of Love"

I promised, a few weeks ago to preach today on the saga of Joseph and his family.

Over the course of the summer we have heard quite a bit of the Genesis story and I think it is important to take a look at what this ancient text says to us today.

We read these stories in brief passages, but to really understand Joseph and his brothers we have to start at Genesis 25 and read straight through to Genesis 50. Let me recap for you:

Jacob, was the twin of Esau, born to Isaac and Rebekah.

Jacob tricked Esau out of his birthright, and then tricked Isaac to receive the important paternal blessing.

Jacob ran away, encountered God, and settled with his mother's relative Laban.

Jacob fell in love with Rachael. He agreed to work for Laban as a shepherd for seven years to earn the right to marry Rachael.

After seven years, Laban tricked him into marrying Rachael's sister, Leah.

Jacob had to work another seven years to get Rachael. He did.

In the process he helped Laban become rich by carefully breeding the sheep.

After twenty years, Jacob wanted to return to his family and entered into an agreement with Laban for half the sheep.

Both Laban and Jacob were deceiving the other about their end of the bargain.

When Jacob left with his clan and half the sheep, Laban pursued him to get back all of the items, particularly the idols, that Jacob's family had sneaked out.

In the end they reached an agreement to never see one another again.

Over the course of time, Leah gave birth to six sons and a daughter. Her maid, Zilpah gave birth to two sons.

Rachael remained barren. Her maid, Bilhah gave birth to two sons.

God finally heard Rachael's cries and she gave birth to Joseph.

Joseph was favored by Jacob because he was the son of the beloved Rachael.

Rachael died giving birth to a second son, Benjamin.

In the end Jacob had fathered thirteen children with four women.

As an aside, while this clan was travelling and seeking a place to settle down, the one sister, Dinah was raped by a territorial prince.

The prince fell in love with her and begged Jacob to let them marry and combine their clans.

Jacob agreed but the 12 brothers did not.

They said "If you want to marry our sister, all the men in your community must be circumcised as we are."

The prince agreed and had the entire male population circumcised. While they were recovering from their surgery Jacob's boys came into town and killed every single one and reclaimed Dinah.

Just an aside. Nice family. Our biblical ancestors.

After this, the clan settles in Bethel where God again speaks to Jacob and renews his promise made to Abraham and Isaac – to lead them to a land of plenty where they will multiply.

Well, now we get to the point where Joseph is seventeen years old. His father loves him best of all and everyone knows it.

Jacob makes him a robe with long sleeves which he wears with pride.

Joseph is in the habit of spying on his older brothers and tattling to his father.

He doesn't have the same responsibilities as the others, he gets to hang around the house while everyone else is out tending sheep.

He keeps telling them that he has dreams where he is in charge and they are all bowing before him.

One day, his brothers have had enough and they decide to kill him. Having second thoughts about taking his life they sell him to passing tradesmen who in turn sell him in Egypt as a slave in Pharaoh's household.

Scripture tells us that God had blessed Joseph and he found favor among Pharaoh's household.

Everyone loved Joseph.

Unfortunately, Pharaoh's wife loved Joseph too much and when Joseph rejected her advances she made up a lie about having been attacked and Joseph was thrown in jail.

In jail he befriends two of Pharaoh's staff and interprets their dreams for them. His interpretations turn out to be accurate.

A few years down the line, Joseph is still in jail, Pharaoh has a dream that he doesn't understand.

His staff person, who is now out of jail, remembers Joseph's gift for dream interpretation and calls him up from the gallows.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that his dream means that the nation will have seven years of prosperity, followed by seven years of famine so that he should develop a strategy to save during the good years, to carry them through the lean years.

Pharaoh is so impressed with Joseph's presentation that he makes Joseph the overseer of the land, second in power only to Pharaoh himself.

So, Joseph, who has an amazing gift for business, develops a strategy of saving grain over the course of the seven prosperous years.

When the famine comes, he prospers by selling grain to people who are starving.

Enter the brothers who sold him.

Jacob sends ten of his sons to Egypt to buy food for their clan.

He keeps his youngest, Benjamin, home with him.

Joseph is who they have to petition for food.

Joseph recognizes them. They do not recognize him.

He puts them in prison accusing them of being spies.

Joseph feels bad and lets them out, gives them grain and sends them home.

A few years go by and Jacob and the brothers need more grain.

Jacob sends them back, but this time they take Benjamin with them, knowing that the Pharaoh's assistant will demand to see him.

In the next scene, the brothers have secured the grain and are traveling home not knowing that sneaky Joseph has placed a valuable item in their bag that they will be accused of stealing.

They are brought back and Joseph says they must leave Benjamin as his slave.

The brothers are distraught, knowing that Jacob will die if he loses Benjamin – the second beloved child of Rachael.

They beg Joseph to relent.

Finally, we come to the passage we read today where Joseph declares his identity to his brothers.

There is much weeping and apologies for having stuck him in a well and sold him to slavery.

Joseph forgives his brothers, saying that God had sent him to Egypt just for this time – so that he might save their family from famine.

All is well.

The brothers go fetch Jacob, who is thrilled that his Joseph is alive (there is no comment about how he felt about the brothers having sold him years ago).

Pharaoh gives them a nice piece of land and they all live happily ever after.

Jacob lived to be 130 years old and Joseph lived to be 110.

Whew. What a story. What a family.

So why is it important that we know this story?

Stories are important because they help us build and shape our identity.

It is rare that we ever know the whole story of someone's life.

We get glimpses, we hear parts, but we never have all the information.

Recently, I attended the funeral of a friend's father.

I had grown up with this family and I knew the father as a strict, old-fashioned Italian patriarch.

At his funeral, friends and family spoke lovingly about a man who had written poetry, played the clarinet, documented family history and nurtured relationships with long lost relatives.

He was described as a man with a charming sense of humor, a lover of flowers.

I was sitting there thinking, "I must be in the wrong church. Who are they talking about?"

I simply didn't know his story. I only had a few verses, not the whole passage. Certainly not 25 chapters.

My friends, our stories make up our lives. They shape us and hone in us the gifts that God has given.

Joseph's story confirmed much of what we learned from the Minor Prophets this summer. God is steadfast in his promises.

God chooses whom God wants to carry out his work on earth.

Even when circumstances seem insurmountable, such as slavery or prison, life can change.

God gives us a variety of gifts, and expects that we will use them.

Joseph's story also reminds us, as did the prophets, that we are human and that we keep making the same mistakes.

As long as our single motivation is for our own well-being, we will be caught in an endless entanglement of deception. We are freed only by caring about others, by acknowledging that we are part of something larger than ourselves.

Last weeks' New York Times included an article about the growing partisan sentiment in our country. The article included this statement: "Americans now choose in their neighborhoods and their churches, to be around others who live like they do and think like they do and every four years vote like they do."

By self-selecting to be around people whose stories we know, or think we know, we lose the opportunity to learn about others.

We forfeit the ability to understand people who are different than we are.

Paul's letter to the Romans, all the way at the other end of the Bible, reiterates Joseph's message:

"For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ and individually we are members one of another."

In the week ahead, I invite you to discern what gifts God has given you and explore how you are using those gifts.

I want you to think about an annoying person who you would like to stuff down a well, and imagine, envision, that person saving your life in years to come.