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Family Matters: Sibling Rivalry

Genesis 37:1-18

There is nothing like a family business to set off fireworks between siblings. Now it does not happen in every family, but it is not unusual for a confrontation to become a daily diet in a family run business.

We are told in the Hebrew Scriptures that Jacob had a late night meeting with God and left limping. His hip was never quite the same. He did, however, reconcile with his brother Esau and received forgiveness and grace from his brother. Jacob set off to live his life with his large family. The family was in the business of raising sheep. The young men of the family were the hands-on workers for the business and Jacob watched over the operation.

It is out in the fields that Jacob's son, Joseph, has a dream and then he shares his dream with his brothers. Now, Joseph is young. Joseph is inexperienced concerning the ways of the world, but please, can you imagine sharing this dream with your siblings. Imagine at the dinner table, you turn to your brothers and sisters and say, "Guess what! I had this great dream and the best part in it is that all of you were bowing down to me!" What response did Joseph expect? He was the youngest. He was a favorite of his father. He was already singled out and spoiled. He is the one with the fancy coat, which I may add, he wore to work! Now, he taunts his brothers with the news that in his dream he has been elevated over them. And if that is not enough, he shares a second dream where even the sun, moon and eleven stars submit to him. It is all too much for his brothers. In their eyes, he is an arrogant, spoiled, brat! Even his adoring father silences Joseph. My guess is that Jacob calls for Joseph to be quiet in part for his own protection so that he will not be injured by his older, very angry brothers. Throughout the passage, the word "hate" is used. In the Hebrew like the English it is said with strong emotion, to hate, to detest, to consider an enemy. The brothers consider Joseph an enemy. Joseph's audacity, his place of privilege in his father's heart and house and in order of birth all work against him.

So, like every good parent, Jacob thinks it over and decides to send Joseph out with his brothers so they can work out their differences amongst themselves. It sounds like a good decision. You can't fight every battle between your children. The youngest in this situation is 17 years old, surely maturity will rule the day and these brothers will come to a solution. Well, they come to a solution, but not one their father imagined. The boys throw Joseph into an empty well for safe keeping and then come to the brilliant decision to sell him. What a great idea! Not only do they get rid of the arrogant little brother, but they also get cash in return. It is a match made in heaven. Joseph is off to Egypt and the brothers carry some extra cash in their pockets.

The brothers hated Joseph. Let me remind you of the dream he shared that took their anger to a new level. Already jealous of his status with their father, this is the dream that seems to push them beyond their limits. I am reading now from the Message version of the Bible.

“Listen to this dream I had. We were all out in the field gathering bundles of wheat. All of a sudden my bundle stood straight up and your bundles circled around it and bowed down to mine.”

The brothers are outraged that they would bow down to their little brother. They are aghast at his arrogance. They turn to each other in disgust and we are told that they could not bring themselves to speak peaceably about him. Jealousy and anger fuel their hatred!

Here is the truth for most of us. We are not going to bow down to our little brother or sister or anyone else. We gave up bowing down to others in this nation when we rebelled against King George of England. Now we, much like Joseph’s brothers, cannot envision ourselves bowing down to anyone.

We are equals, we have respect for those in authority, but we are not going to bow and submit to others. We are certainly not going to let another human reign over us. So strong are we in this conviction that it has become difficult for us, even people of faith, to bow down to our God and allow our God to reign over us.

Encounters with God leave us changed. Jacob wrestled with God and walked away changed for life, not only physically as he limped, but also his name changed and his very nature changed. He set out to restore the damage he had done even if it cost him his life. Time and time again, as we read of people in scripture we find that as one encounters God, he or she is transformed. Part of our problem is we are not really seeking change. We are pretty happy the way we are. We are comfortable, self reliant, intelligent people. Why do we really need God? We have done pretty well on our own. Sure there are occasions when we question our ability to control the circumstances around us and then we are more willing to offer a prayer, a plea to our God, but most of the time, we feel pretty confident in our ability to manage our life.

The brothers resisted bowing down to Joseph. We can relate to them because we resist bowing down to God. We prefer an arm’s length relationship where we know God is accessible if needed, but not close enough to pick us up and shake us into a new reality, a new way of seeing and living in the grace of Jesus Christ. We want to be ethical and compassionate and kind as long as it ultimately brings us benefit, but real transformation, that is not so attractive to us.

I am reading a book entitled *Why Good Things happen to Good People*, by Stephen Post and Jill Neimark with a group that meets on Wednesday evenings. In the preface of the book, there is a story about Leola McNair. The reader is introduced to her in a hospital room, where she was anticipating the amputation of both of her legs. She looks at her pastor who is desperately trying to find some words of comfort or encouragement or something to say to Leola, and she says to him, “I have been here in my bed thinking about all the wonderful things I’m going to do with my hands when I go home from the hospital.” The authors write: “in the desert of her sickness, she planted a rose. Her future as a double amputee did not mar her view of life or break her spirit. If anything, it caused her to pull up from the great spiritual well inside of her a greater and more profound witness to true courage and love. She did just as she proclaimed. She began to

do wonderful things with her hands. Nobody could feel sorry for Leola McNair because she was so busy, so engaged in bringing help and hope to others.”

This is a life transformed. It grows not from a casual friendship with the Divine, but rather a ruthless trust in the God of Abraham, the God of Moses, the God of Jacob, the God of Joseph, the God of Mary, the God of you and me.

Those jealous, angry, hate filled brothers would later find themselves in the midst of a famine and they would go to Egypt to seek help. Their help came in the form of food that was provided to them from the court of the Pharaoh by of all people, their long lost brother, Joseph. Joseph clung to his faith while in exile and allowed the love of God to heal the hurt and the rejection he must have felt toward his brothers. Instead of denying their need, instead of turning his back on them, Joseph, full of grace provides for his family and rejoices in his reunion with them.

Exile comes in many ways. We may know what it means to be rejected by brothers or sisters or parents. We may be the one who has never fit in our family.

Exile comes in many ways. We may have experienced rejection in a romantic relationship, an engagement, a marriage. We may be carrying a heart that has been broken for years.

Exile comes in many ways. We may know rejection at school or in the work place or with friends. We may wander through our days feeling inadequate because of the words and actions of another.

Exile comes in many ways, we may feel alone and abandoned because of the death of a loved one. Though we may be surrounded by people who love us, we may very well carry a large hole in our heart for the one or ones who are no longer present with us.

Exile comes in many ways. We may worship week after week and yet not experience the love that God showers upon us. We may be wondering, “Has God walked away from me?”

Exile comes in many ways. Have we self imposed our exile? Could it be that we have never fully offered ourselves to God? Could it be that we resist getting on our knees physically or spiritually before God, allowing God to be Creator and Sustainer and we resist God’s reign over our lives?

Exile comes in many ways.

She was a young single mother with three children, a part time job, and she was completely overwhelmed. She had once been diagnosed with a manic/depressive disorder, but she felt that was in her past and she had long ago forgone medication or treatment. She came to see me one afternoon in my office. She had the children with her and she came by to give me a beautiful ring. She told me it was one of her greatest possessions and she just wanted me to have it. She also shared that she had appreciated knowing me and my ministry in the church. Red flags flew up all around me. Here she was, one with so little giving me this treasure and basically saying “Goodbye” to me. I asked one of the people in the office to watch over the children and the

mother and I sat down for a long talk. She shared that she could no longer cope and that she had a plan to kill herself and her children. I asked if she would be willing to go for a little drive with me and I took her to a mental health clinic. It turned from bad to worse at that moment. She was confined and admitted to a locked mental health unit. Her children were removed and because no family members wished to assist her at the time, the children were placed into foster care.

I assure you that I am not the hero of this story, God is. Over time the mother would receive treatment and then she would live on her own without her children for six months. She received training to enable her to get a better job and moved away from her abusive extended family. She saw her children at every opportunity and slowly but surely she went through the court system and her children returned to her.

She told me many months later, when she was speaking to me again, that the treatment and the medication did help, but it was not until she was on her knees in that locked unit that she realized she could no longer go it alone. She had to place herself before God; the good, the bad and in her words, the crazy and allowed God to heal her from the inside out. Her challenges were many and she did not miraculously turn into the model parent and successful entrepreneur, but she did allow God's love for her to shape her in a new way, to transform her and give her hope, real hope, tangible hope. The first step in that process was ruthless trust in God and finally allowing God to reign over her life.

I saw her years later at a baseball game. She had her children with her and she ran up to greet me, healthy, happy and still very much centered in her life with Christ.

Exile comes in many ways and yet we are never separated from the love of God for us. Joseph greeted his family with grace and with joy because he remained faithful in his exile. He was shaped not by his betrayal, but by God's steadfast presence and God's faithfulness to him.

Consider this day, places in your life where you too feel like you are living in exile. Lean into the love of God, allow God's healing presence to envelop you and know that grace is greater than hate and hope deeper than despair.

As God led Joseph, allow God to lead you into a path of reconciliation, hope and grace. God remains faithful to you this day and every day.