



“When It’s Just Not Fair”

Text: Genesis 39:1-23

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Sometimes you pick up the Bible and think you’re reading today’s newspaper. Before us, this morning, is a story that is incredibly ancient and yet seems to have fallen off the pages of every major Sunday edition in this country. It reads like the latest script from “House of Cards” or some other such show that seems to take us into the shadowed under-belly of power, politics, and corruption.

The story of Joseph, in the pages of Genesis, is a story that begins with injustice, pain, false accusations, violence, and imprisonment, and ends with justice, joy, life, blessings, and abundance. We all know how Joseph’s story begins, or at least we think we do. Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers who have had their fill of him. He is taken to Egypt, where he is sold into slavery in the house of Potiphar, a captain of the guard in the Pharaoh’s court. In that capacity, Joseph rises to a place of authority in Potiphar’s house. By Joseph’s good work, his faithfulness to God and Potiphar, and the blessing of God that we are assured rests on Joseph, there is blessing, abundance, and wholeness. Add to that, we are told, that “Joseph was handsome and good looking” - a burden some of us are forced to bear (or so I am told). From the dead end of abandonment, betrayal, and slavery, “the blessing of the Lord” and the presence of the Lord was with Joseph.

Still, in spite of all that success and the praise and gratitude lavished on Joseph, he was still a slave - and a Hebrew slave at that. Potiphar’s wife says, “Look, my husband had to bring us a Hebrew to dally with us!” So, now enters racial and ethnic issues into the story. Prejudice is part of this narrative.

Then, don’t forget, there are issues of class and power. Potiphar’s wife is in a powerful position. She is among the elite in Egyptian society. Joseph may be successful, but he is still a slave. All the power is in the hands of Potiphar’s wife. Her word will be respected far more than Joseph’s, in spite of his good looks and success.

Potiphar's wife begins grooming Joseph to be her lover. Joseph refuses her advances. She kept at it. "She spoke to Joseph day after day," we are told and, we are told, "Joseph would not consent to lie beside her or to be with her." The double-entendre, the innuendo, the playful and suggestive comments - day after day - all attempting to wear down Joseph.

Finally, Potiphar's wife tries one last time to manipulate Joseph, grabs his robe, and he runs from her, leaving the robe in her hands. She uses the robe to condemn Joseph who is unjustly taken to prison for violating Potiphar's wife, without anything resembling due process and he is left there with the most desperate of prisoners - those who have offended the Pharaoh's honor.

And still, even there, we are told again, Joseph rises to a place of authority and respect, with the chief jailer giving him authority. Again, we are told, "...the Lord was with Joseph and whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper."

That's the story before us this morning.

Sadly, that story has been with us for a very long time. We see that story played out in new ways in the #metoo movement that has revealed in stunning power the stories of influential men behaving in criminal ways toward women over whom they exercise authority. We see that story played out in the report of the Pennsylvania Attorney General's report on the abuse of hundreds of victims at the hands of religious leaders. We see that story being played out in stories of athletes being abused by doctors and coaches. We see that story being played in the corridors of our national government, as elected leaders and appointed leaders are accused and found guilty of sexual improprieties.

Now, I have no intention of entering into the political nature of these events. If you want to have that conversation, we can do that when I'm not standing in this pulpit. I will not allow this pulpit to be used for partisan politics.

But I will speak about the nature of these stories that are echoes of our lesson for the morning. There are theological matters of the highest importance that need to be lifted up so that they can become part of the conversation that we are having as a culture and as a society.

First, as the ancient story of creation reminds us, we are created "teselem Elohim" - "in the image of God." All people - regardless of gender, race, creed, sexual orientation, class, achieved educational level, political philosophy or party - regardless of any of the things we use to divide ourselves from each other, shred the fabric of our community, or shatter the common good - all people are created in the image of God and are entitled to the same respect we would offer God. To defile the image of God in our neighbor is to defile God. Period. Full stop.

On August 24, 1955, Emmett Till, who was an African-American 14-year old, was alleged to have offended a white woman. Four days later, Emmett Till was picked up around 2:00 a.m., by two white men, beaten

beyond recognition, shot in the head, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River, from which his body was retrieved three days later. Till had been accused of whistling and making flirtatious comments to a white woman. Having grown up in Chicago, he had no idea of the cultural lines he was crossing. Later, when his attackers were placed on trial, the alleged victim recanted part of her testimony. Still, the all-white jury in 1955 Mississippi found the accused attackers not guilty of Emmett Till's murder and desecration. The image of God was unjustly desecrated, murdered, and maliciously defaced.

To meet the challenge of the second greatest commandment - to "love our neighbor" - is to recognize the image of God in which our neighbor is created and to treat that neighbor, not only as we ourselves would want to be treated, but to treat that neighbor as we would treat God.

Second, in stories and reports of this kind of misconduct, look at who has the power. In our story, Potiphar's wife holds the power. Joseph is a slave - a highly successful, good looking slave - but a slave nonetheless. His words will never have the authority of Potiphar's wife. His account will never be as easily accepted as hers. Potiphar's wife has the power.

Misconduct is about the abuse of power. It is a person of power being able to perpetrate the misconduct because the victim has less power, or is powerless, to stop it. A teacher has power over a student. A religious leader has power over a parishoner. A wealthy person has power over a poorer person. A man has power over a woman, in our patriarchal society. A white person has power over a person of color. An adult has power over a child. A doctor has power over a patient. We don't want to admit much of that, but it is - sadly - still true.

When reports of misconduct arise, begin formulating your opinions and understandings by looking for who has the power. In the vast majority of these situations, the person with power is more readily believed than the person without power. That is how you create the fear of reporting. That is how you perpetuate the misconduct. That's why the abuse is kept secret by the victims for so long.

This is unjust, and our God is a God of justice and righteousness. The prophets spoke against the abuse of power and for the cause of those who were victims. There is a special place in God's heart for those who are the victims of injustice and violence. Read the scriptures and you cannot arrive at any other conclusion.

Third, the misconduct we are witnessing in our society and culture today is, in no small part, complicated by the over-sexualization of our culture. Way back in 1967, which were pretty wild times, the Presbyterian Church wrote in its Confession of 1967:

[committed relationships] exemplify in a basic way God's ordering of the interpersonal life for which God created humankind. Anarchy in sexual relationships is a symptom of alienation from God, neighbors, and self. Perennial confusion

about the meaning of sex has been aggravated in our day... by the exploitation of sexual symbols in mass communication.

The church, as the household of God, is called to lead people out of this alienation into the responsible freedom of the new life in Christ. Reconciled to God, people have joy in and respect for their own humanity and that of other persons...

To hold an authentic view of human sexuality, we must begin with a belief in a God of love who has created us as sexual beings to relate to one another in love. In other words, as if we needed to say it again, there is nothing wrong with human sexuality. It is when we abuse our sexuality and express it in destructive ways that we run into problems. When we practice our sexuality responsibly, our lives are enriched and enhanced.

And this has nothing to do with sexual orientation. It is true for gay couples and straight couples. When you make a commitment, when you make a promise, when you make a vow - you keep it. Infidelity is destructive. Unfaithfulness creates chaos. Adultery breeds anarchy and leads to alienation from God and from one another.

Where's the good news? Is there any good news? I think there is.

Throughout it all, we are reminded that God is with Joseph. God is with the victim. God is with the one unjustly accused. God is with those for whom the system simply does not work.

Every 98 seconds, someone in the United States is sexually assaulted. That means that in the course of this morning's worship, 36 people have been assaulted. That says nothing about those who are experiencing abuse that goes unreported.

As God was with Joseph, so we are called to be with those who are victims of this abuse and injustice. We are called to honor the image of God in which all people are created and we are called to denounce those who mar and disfigure that image by their violent actions. We are called to speak truth to those in power and hold them accountable for their abuses of power. We are called to be faithful to our partners and to those whom we have made sacred promises and we are called to raise up fidelity and faithfulness as truly human behaviors and condemn and denounce those who cause anarchy by their alienation from God, neighbors, and self, calling them back to an authentically human way of life - life as God created it to be.

Our presence is to be evidence of God's presence. Our presence is a reminder that God is with us - and God's presence is cause for celebration and source of continual and unending hope.

The good news is that for those who are treated unjustly, for those who suffer wrong, for those who are denigrated and disparaged without just cause, God is present. We are present. And we will not abandon anyone - especially when it's just not fair. We will be there.

For now and evermore. Amen.