

“The Power of Jealousy”

August 27, 2017

In the Beginning: (God's) Family Drama series

Jealousy is not a new problem for our faith ancestors. Go back to Cain and Abel, Sarah and Hagar and Sarah's concern for Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob and Esau, and now Jacob and his sons (12 of them in all - only two are Rachel's - Joseph and Benjamin).

We shouldn't be surprised that jealousy plays a part here after all we've experienced in Genesis - the story of beginnings, but this is reality TV at its best! There's favoritism, jealousy, anger, conspiracy to fake a death, cover-up, and the grief that goes with it. It's all here, and Jacob, Joseph, and the other sons will journey through some difficult times together.

I just saw the Tony-award winning musical “Hamilton” this week, and it's been credited with a renewed interest in early American politics, and I will say, it was an incredible artistic creation. I can see what the buzz is about, and I'll never look at American history the same again!

Perhaps you're familiar with this last part of the book of Genesis, and maybe you're one of those who know Joseph's story because of Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice. One reviewer says, “Bible study was never so much fun!” It was in the late 1960's when the musical was first developed and has grown in popularity since then. And for many people, Joseph's story came to life in a new way. The challenge is that we also face our struggles with family and jealousy.

Now maybe jealousy isn't something we talk about a lot, but I will tell you that it's there. It's a part of us. It works its way into our lives when we look around. It's a part of our life with social media - people looking at one another's pictures and profiles and sizing themselves up against each other.

The problem here is that you'd think that Jacob would know better! Remember how he was constantly struggling against Esau. The good news is that Jacob and Esau experience reconciliation. Back in Genesis 33, Esau runs to meet Jacob in an embrace, and they weep together. In his wrestling with God, Jacob gained strength for what was ahead. The struggle brought him to a place of understanding what he needed to do and who he needed to be in order to mend his relationship with Esau.

Unfortunately, there's a sense that Jacob has been very clear about how he plays favorites. Jacob has put Joseph in charge of overseeing his brothers even though he's younger. We're told that Jacob loved Joseph more than the others, and right then you know it won't turn out well. He gives him a special coat to wear, and the brothers begin to hate him.

Even so, we have to admit that Joseph doesn't do too well in how he responds. From the beginning, Joseph is a dreamer. Let's just admit it: there are probably some dreams that we have that shouldn't be shared. Sometimes dreams give us great

comfort, but sometimes they're so strange or embarrassing that we just don't know what to make of them.

Joseph chose to share his dreams with his father and his brothers. Now remember he's seventeen, but really that was the age of adulthood. Maybe Joseph doesn't get it, or maybe he's got a big ego. The basic idea that came to him in his dreams was that everyone else would end up bowing down to him. He would be in the place of power in his family. You can imagine how the others felt - jealousy.

Dr. Gary Collins makes an important point: "There is a distinction between jealousy and envy. To envy is to want something which belongs to another person. In contrast, jealousy is the fear that something which we possess will be taken away by another person. Although jealousy can apply to our jobs, our possessions, or our reputations, the word more often refers to anxiety which comes when we are afraid that the affections of a loved one might be lost to a rival."

You can see why jealousy comes front and center. We learned from Jacob that our faith is marked by struggle – not because God wants to hurt us, but because struggle is part of faith. There aren't always easy answers. Our relationships aren't perfect. We have to work to do what God calls us to do. But there's also healing in struggle. We figure out who we are and who we can become by God's grace.

And we certainly see struggle in Jacob's family. This isn't the first time that jealousy has taken hold in our faith family. Remember Jacob and Esau fighting in Rebekah's womb? The jealousy between Jacob's wives? Now jealousy has filtered down to Joseph and his brothers. Again, there's the problem of the younger son threatening the power of the older. It makes for an explosive situation.

Ultimately, jealousy makes us self-centered rather than centered on God. It eats away at us and makes us inward-focused rather than outward-focused. We begin to focus on what we don't have rather than on what we do have. It makes us lose sight of God's blessings in our lives. And none of us is immune to it. I was just talking to a friend the other day who was disappointed when another person couldn't be happy for her success, but was jealous instead.

Jealousy is especially easy to see on social media as people compare themselves to each other or make comments. It's easy for us to go down the path of judgment of someone else rather than being thankful for the good things in our lives and encouraging one another.

Jealousy doesn't allow us to grow in faith. It takes away our capacity to have hope and trust in God. Again, the self-centeredness that comes with jealousy can move us away from remembering how good God is. We begin to live in fear of losing status or relationship rather than living in faith that God is at work in our lives.

Perhaps the saddest effect of jealousy is that it makes us view people as less than they are. They aren't worthy to be happy or to succeed. The fear that overtakes us clouds our vision of others as beloved and important.

Now I say that all with the caveat that another force at work here is a family where there is clear pain because of favoritism and struggle. Jacob loved Joseph, but his special treatment only served to make the situation worse. The love that Jacob showed Joseph was powerful and (I believe) something that sustained him in his own struggles, but this is a cautionary tale about playing favorites as we relate to our family members.

Jealousy in our human condition is powerful and destructive enough that God addresses it in a few more generations – when God gives Moses the commandments to share with the Israelites. God says that we must not covet our neighbor’s house or spouse or property. To covet is more than just wanting someone else’s stuff. To covet means that we also don’t want them to have it altogether.

It’s interesting that Joseph and his brothers can’t even talk to each other. When communication breaks down, there will be certain conflict. This is true in any family. When there’s already tension, but then you add in the inability for people to talk peaceably – meaning in a way that they can understand each other – the emotional toll is overwhelming.

We’ve been focusing on the family drama in Genesis as it relates to our lives, and for some of us, we face dysfunction as well. Certainly Jacob carries on some level of it, and we see the fear build up in the brothers who don’t want to lose their status as leaders or lose the promise of a future. Jealousy turns into all out hatred, but real fear is behind all of it.

Fear is a powerful motivator and a destructive force. We’ve seen it at play in hate speech, acts of violence, and even in ourselves when jealousy creeps up. It should shake us up even as we’re reminded in Scripture over and over “do not be afraid” and in I John: that “perfect love casts out fear.” The remedy for our fear is faith and trust in God who is with us.

Today we welcome Maggie Sroka into the family of God through baptism. She is a part of four generations who are connected here at Lake Harbor, and a child who is well-loved by her family and our church. When we celebrate with her, we remember God’s promises in our lives and the love of God shown in Jesus’ willingness to stand against fear with faith.

We’re baptized into the Body of Christ. And with baptism, we’re called to grow in grace. It’s not an option – it’s a commandment and a calling. Baptism isn’t just a ritual where babies come in front of the church dressed in their finest. We believe that something happens in baptism. God names and claims Maggie. And we promise to help the child grow in faith.

So back to Joseph’s story and ours. There’s no room for jealousy in the Body of Christ. We stand on equal ground by the grace of God. Grace leaves no room for jealousy. But there’s a lot of room for dreams and hope. A friend of mine said to me once, “There’s great hope in baptism.”

For too long, we've been stuck in our past. Granted, Joseph would face a horrible time – hurt by his own family and taken to a strange land. But he would live out God's covenant and come out with a powerful witness to God's grace. Baptism takes us into a new future with Jesus Christ.

And our hope is connected to a promise – the promise that God makes as our Creator who is always with us – and the promise we make to this child. Maggie doesn't know everything she needs to know to live a Christian life yet. We have a responsibility to help her learn it. In baptism, we name God's claim on a child even before she knows it and before we see it fully. God claims Maggie, and we pray that she'll confirm her baptism when she has a better understanding of God's calling on her life.

I pray for myself and for all of us - that we remember God's love for all of us and the love of Christ for all of us and the power of the Holy Spirit that fell on people from everywhere - showing no favoritism, but calling us to be followers of the One who knows us, claims us, and loves us deeply enough that we can be confident and assured that we are never alone, that fear isn't the mightiest power, but love is always stronger.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.