

St. Thomas Episcopal Church in Medina, WA
The Rev. Alexander Breckinridge
Church Year A
August 13, 2017
Pentecost 10
Genesis 37: 1-4, 12-28 • Matthew 14: 22-33

Throughout this long, hot, and hazy summer we have been following the story of one of the most dysfunctional families you will ever meet. Abraham and Sarah, struggle to have a child until finally Sarah encourages Abraham to have relations with her concubine, Hagar. When Hagar gives birth to a boy who was called Ishmael, Sarah is so jealous, she convinces Abraham to throw Hagar and the baby Ishmael out into the desert. Fortunately, God is with them and they survive. Sarah finally gives birth to a boy of her own. Isaac, but she almost loses the precious boy when Abraham gets it into his head that he needs to sacrifice Isaac to appease God. Once again, God intervenes in the nick of time and Isaac is spared. After plenty of adventures of his own, Isaac settles down with Rebekah who gives birth to twin boys, Esau and Jacob. They are in conflict with each other from the moment they leave Rebekah's womb. The conflict bursts into open warfare when Jacob manages to trick his father, Isaac, who by this time is blind and senile, into giving Esau's birthright to him, Jacob, the younger son. That so enrages Esau that he vows to kill Jacob. And then Jacob goes on the run for eight chapters in Genesis. Along the way he dreams of ladders ascending and descending to Heaven. He wrestles with an angel who breaks his hip. He falls in love with a girl named Rachel whose father, Laban tricks him into marrying her older sister, Leah, and then requires Jacob to work for him for seven more years in order to marry Rachel. He fathers 12 sons, some of whom are Rachel's children, some of whom are Leah's children and some of whom are children of concubines who are travelling with the family. After finally reconciling with Esau, Jacob and his big, and I do mean big, family, finally settle down in the place where, we are told that his father Isaac had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan.

I mean, this could be on Oprah or in a telenovela, couldn't it? What a dysfunctional family! And it's about to get worse. When we drop in on the family this morning, we find that Jacob, now old himself, has committed a pretty serious parenting error. He has singled out one of his 12 boys as his favorite and has showed his favoritism by giving the boy, Joseph, an expensive coat.

Joseph seems to really like the role of annoying younger brother. For example, he's a snitch. Remember he tells Jacob that the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, who he was supposed to be working with in the fields, were instead off somewhere else shooting pool. He then had a dream where his older brothers were all bowing down before him, and he told them about it! He's the annoying little twerp, right? What a dysfunctional family!

Does any of this sound familiar? Did you have a sibling who was the favored child, the proverbial “fair haired boy”? Or maybe that was you! Either way, a tough spot to be in. Would you describe your own family as dysfunctional? I bet you **know** some dysfunctional families. We all do.

Now we’re going to fast forward to the end of the story. And the takeaway from the story is that God’s grace can be found even in the midst of the worst family dysfunction. Remember that the next time you are in the midst of your own family conflict.

OK. So Joseph is so hated by his brothers that some of them want to kill him. But Reuben convinces them, after they’ve already thrown Joseph down a well, to instead sell him to a traveling group of caravan traders. Joseph eventually lands in Egypt, where, after lots of adventures that include interpreting Pharaoh’s dreams, he winds up being Pharaoh’s most trusted adviser. Talk about landing on your feet!

Well, years pass, and there is a bad famine in Canaan. So Jacob’s remaining sons decide to go to Egypt where, partly as a result of Joseph’s prudent management, the Egyptians have stored up a huge surplus of grain. Judah and the others at first don’t recognize their little brother Joseph, all grown up and very important.

After lots more adventures that we’ll read about on Sundays to come, Joseph and his brothers are reconciled, Jacob brings the rest of the family to live with Joseph in Egypt, and Joseph’s brothers spend a good bit of the last five chapters of Genesis apologizing to Joseph.

Joseph closes by telling his brothers this: “Do not be afraid. Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it for good ... so have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones.” In this way he reassured, speaking kindly to them. [Genesis 50:20-21]

So a couple of observations. First, I don’t care how crazy your family is, or how crazy your neighbor’s family is, they’re sure not any crazier than the family Abraham and Sarah began and that Isaac and Rebekah and Jacob and Leah and Rachel and their concubines carried on. , And look what God did with that wildly dysfunctional family. That is to say, your crazy family isn’t any crazier than the family of the patriarchs and matriarchs, the original biblical family. I hope that’s comforting!

God was not only present to them in their dysfunction, God was working in and through them, even in the midst of their dysfunction – let’s be straight about it – even in the midst of all the evil they were doing – God was working to draw all that evil into the divine plan for good. Joseph trusted God’s purpose on behalf of life and he reminded his brothers that they could trust God’s purpose too – even when it seemed like they were frustrating God’s purposes!

It reminds me of something wonderful that the Trappist Monk, Brother David Steindl-Ross says: “There is grace in every package, no matter how ugly the wrapping.” We just need to look for it. Open our eyes and our ears and our hearts to it. The grace is always there.

The whole Genesis story is a story of God’s grace, God’s purpose for human life to thrive, for love to survive – God’s purpose is always at work. Even when it’s not immediately apparent. God holds life together in all its complexity and ambiguity. So remember that in the midst of your own family frustrations and disappointments.

And here’s a second observation and it ties the Genesis story with this morning’s Gospel reading. Yours isn’t the only crazy dysfunctional family. Neither is your neighbor’s. Sometimes the human family looks like it’s nothing but crazy and dysfunctional. In fact, if you have that feeling right now, no one would blame you. I’ve sat with and listened to a number of folks recently who are experiencing what I would call acute existential anxiety. Maybe you are too. Lots of folks are feeling it, so you wouldn’t be alone. I mean, the 5-column headline in the *Washington Post* read “World Holds Its Breath on N. Korea.”

In our Gospel reading we saw that Peter clearly had a case of acute existential anxiety. He’s in a leaky boat in the middle of a big storm way off shore. Sound familiar? How’s your boat these days? He sees a mysterious figure out in the middle of the storm who tells him to get out of the boat and into the water. What? The voice says, “It’s I, Peter. Don’t be afraid.” So Peter says, “ok” and starts walking towards the voice. Just then, a strong wind comes up and Peter realizes he’s in trouble. He’s sinking. “Lord, save me” he cries. Jesus – because that is who the voice belongs to – puts out his hand, catches hold of him says, “Why did you doubt?” and pulls him into the boat.

Here’s Peter’s learning. It’s the same one Joseph’s brothers had. And it needs to be our learning too in the midst of the current storm with our crazy dysfunctional human family. You don’t let go of Jesus’ hand. In fact, you can’t. Really, you say? No you can’t because when Jesus has you, Love has you. In fact, Love **is** you. Love, and your deep need for Love, and it is your deepest need, the need for Love, recognizes Love. You see, you already have what you’re looking for. Your “little faith” – and that’s what we’re all afraid of, is that we don’t have enough faith – your little bit of faith can’t cancel God’s faith in you. John the Evangelist reminds us that God is Love and that Perfect Love casts out fear. In the midst of all your acute existential anxiety – and you may be experiencing that for very good reason – in the midst of your little boat being tossed around in the storm – perfect love casts out fear.

What the powers of the world might mean for evil, God will use and mold and shape for good. And it’s always there. In the midst of the storm and the dysfunction, your house is being built on a new rock-solid foundation. Love. Not love that’s out there somewhere. Love that’s right here. You are love. It’s in you. It **is** you.

At Communion, we'll be singing that old favorite, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand." In these storm-tossed times, when your boat feels leaky enough to sink right now, when the crazy, dysfunctional human family looks like it's finally ready to blow itself up, reach out your hand to Jesus. Let the Love that lives in you connect to that Big Love, to that Perfect Love. That Perfect Love will cast out all your fears. Amen.