

“Fair” (Genesis 37)

It all started with a chocolate bunny, it always does this time of year. Now, this was the last chocolate bunny available in the Bixby household. So, Gina and I, wanting to sidestep any potential problems, thought we'd found a hiding place that was brilliant. But there was a breach in our security, foiled and outsmarted by a six and four year old who I am convinced have a highly developed sense of smell for candy, cannot image where that came from. Watching as my beloved began to pull and tug at the box containing the treasure, arguing over who found it first, I swiftly moved in to offer crowd control and offered the age old parental suggestion. “Why don't we share?” I asked. My question hung in the air and I could see we were getting dangerously close to a stalemate where I might need to rescue the bunny with force, always my last option. At the last moment, my children reluctantly relinquished the bunny to my care. Getting out the cutting board, I steadied my hand to make a precision cut. Let's just be clear there is a reason why I am a pastor and not a surgeon. So, despite my best efforts, I guess one piece was a millimeter larger than the other. And upon spying this injustice, with a whining tone reserved specifically for such moments, one of my children (name withheld to protect...well at this point does it really matter?) belts out, “It's not fair.” To which, I replied with the classic, tried and true parental wisdom, and feel free to say it along with me, “Life is not fair,” as though that truism mattered or made a difference.

Somewhere deep within us all is a scale that tips back and forth throughout life, and though our ability to articulate our frustration at the unfairness of life becomes more sophisticated over time, many of our grumblings still amount to, “it's not fair.” The co-worker who goofs off and you have to do more work; the person who cluelessly steps in front of you in line because they are talking or texting or twittering about being in line at the store; the plans that get interrupted; the additional stress when your shoulders already throb from tension; friends we know within our very being what feels fair and what does not.

And so when Joseph receives a coat, a symbol of his favored status, the flowing sleeves a sign that his father did not expect him to work all that hard because in his day anyone who wore a cloak like this didn't work in the fields, they walked around the fields showing off their beautiful flowing robe to others. And friends, honestly, I am right with the brothers wondering what in the world is Jacob thinking. Of course, this was going to cause arguments and jealousy and as scripture says even hatred. Those strong emotions are natural. But notice the trouble doesn't start with the coat. The tension begins because Joseph is a bit of a tattler. Sure, scripture says profoundly that Joseph brings ‘a bad report of [his brothers] to his father.’ But friends, I've been there. Growing up if I saw my brother doing something I knew and he knew he was not supposed to do, whether or not to tell my parents was a no brainer. There was no gut wrenching debating, in fact I probably had to contain my glee a bit. To bring ‘a bad report’ about his brothers, it's kind of report brought back when Joshua on the edge of the promise land sends out spies to Jericho. So there is a sense of almost being on the lookout, intentionally trying to see the bad.

So, to add insult to injury, as a result, maybe even a reward for his report, Joseph gets this coat. There is this wonderful complexity in the spaces in-between the words of scripture as this story begins. And just in case we don't get that the mounting tension, the broken relationship between Joe and his siblings here, Genesis makes it painfully clear with not just one but two almost offensive dreams. Notice, this is the first time and one of the few times in

scripture that the dream does not have a direct mention of the divine being involved. Even when Joe's father, Jacob, dreamed dreams the divine was either explicit in the form of actual angels climbing a ladder, pretty clear right; or at least implied in the form of a mysterious being who wrestled with Jacob on the night before he had to confront his own broken sibling relationship with Jacob's older brother Esau. Instead, Joseph's dreams whether sheaves or stars still sound presumptuous to the ears of both brothers and dad.

The story keeps unfolding, Jacob sends Joe out to find his brothers who are tending the sheep somewhere. Now, here is where the narrative brings in some wonderful mystery for us. Jacob sends Joe with these words, "Go now; see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." The word 'well' here is shalom, as in peace, as in right relationship with all creation. Is Jacob sending Joseph out to make peace? Or is he sending him out on another spy mission? It is vague, intentionally so, I think. Moreover, Joseph set off to the place where he expected to find his brothers. But doesn't find them there, but instead a stranger, who knows more than Joe. What's the deal with the stranger? Isn't it a truism that sometimes those who are distant from us often know us better than our kin? Is the stranger part of the brothers' plot? Again, it is vague, intentionally so. When he finally spotted them, the brothers' anger echoes that of the very first sibling rivalry in Genesis, when Cain killed Abel. But Reuben, the oldest of Jacob's boys and should have been rightful heir of affection, tried to squelch that anger, perhaps to try to gain back some of his father's approval?

The brother threw Joe in a pit or more precisely a cistern; until conveniently enough along come some Ishmaelites who buy Joseph and then sell him as a slave down in Egypt. In thirty-six short verses sets the stage for us this drama. Joseph is not just an entertaining yarn. Joseph actually has powerful implications for us and for the unfolding of our faith. First, Joe is a bridge. When our Jewish ancestors asked that question Nancy posed at the beginning of service, "if Abraham and Isaac and Jacob all lived in Canaan, how in the world did the Jewish people end up in slavery." Well, the rabbi would say, it all begins with a lad named Joseph. He is a bridge between Genesis and Exodus; between the beginning and the defining moment of the Jewish faith. Joseph's life gets us from Canaan to Egypt, and the book of Exodus begins with when a new king comes to power in Egypt who did not know Joseph and looks around and see these foreigners from the north inhabiting his land and does not know why.

Second, Joseph helps complete a picture of sibling dynamics in Genesis. Cain and Abel ends in complete brokenness; Isaac and Ishmeal (children of Abraham) ends in complete unawareness of the other; Jacob and Esau (children of Isaac) ends with the two going different directions. But Joseph narrative ends with reconciliation and forgiveness and restoration of relationship. We know these realities. We live them in our families. We have relatives who embody these pathways of brokenness, unawareness, tolerating, and also the power of coming back together. All are true and all are there right from the beginning in Genesis.

Third, the life of Joseph's narrative is even woven into the Gospels. Themes of Joseph include: One called beloved and favored at the beginning is eventually treated as a servant; One whose vision or dreams challenges the way we think of the world is seen as dangerous and must be done away with; One who is presumed dead is found alive, does that sound familiar? The connection between Jesus and Joseph goes deeper than just the

coincidence that centuries later another Joseph, who dreams dreams, fathers a child named Jesus. The lives of both have faithful parallels.

In the end, part of what Joseph invites us into is to wrestle with the realities of our family dynamics. The narrative does not shelter us from the dysfunction that we experience today. The narrative does not shelter us from the difficulties we face as we try to live with our kin. The narrative does not seek to provide simple answers to questions of fairness either. Was Joe right to flaunt his coat? Was the brothers' anger justifiable? How about for us? How do we balance that tightrope between pride and humility in our places of work or at home or even here at church? Do we listen to others lovingly, are we willing to compromise with our brothers and sisters here when trying to do God's work? Or do we sometimes get in a huff, concerned about who gets what when and how? Life together, sharing our lives with each other has tremendous power. To comfort one another, to reconcile, to break bread together; all of that is sacred, but the truth is also that when we try to make decisions, when we struggle between choices where no option feels good, life together can also be messy, friends. Joseph lays that mess out for us as a metaphor. Sure, in the end everything works out well for Joe and his family, but along the way the twists and turns cut close to us because they reflect back, if we let them, our lives with our families and our life together as a faithful community. Maybe there are no simple conclusions for how faith and fairness are to live together inside and outside of these walls. Maybe all there is, is our human attempts to walk the tightrope between the fairness and faith: relying on grace; apologizing often; listening openly; diligently seeking compromise; risking reconciliation; and in all things trying to love one another. It might not be fair, but it is life that can be blessed through our connections with each other. And that is a truth I can trust and live with, fair or not.

Thanks be to God and let the people of God say, "Amen!"