

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

"A Fractious Family"

Scripture: Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21, Psalm 40:1-11

Hymns: We praise you, O God 425, The steadfast love of the Lord 20, The Lord's My Shepherd (Stuart Townend) Great is thy faithfulness 324

September 18, 2016

Rev. Steve Filyk

The church is often imagined as ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY:

a place where people work and worship in unity of spirit.

Where folks laugh with each other, and cry with each other,

Where 'never is heard, a discouraging word'.

The church is often imagined as ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY.

But if you ever get involved in anything more than Sunday worship,

You'll realise that the church tends to fall short of this dream.

Earlier this year a story came across the newswire,

A story from Memphis, Tennessee:

"Brawl spills out into the street after church".

It was reported that "Police found about a dozen people

brawling in the middle of the street

in what they said were three or four separate fights.

Police said nobody would stop

and obey their commands

and had to be physically separated...

Witnesses said the feud started at ChristQuest Community Church

before spilling into the street...

That's when neighbors said one of the people

intentionally hit four people with her car.

"She hit them with the car and kept going," the witness said."ⁱ

Now the story didn't report what started the argument.

But we can easily imagine the endless possibilities:

Dispute about worship,

Arguments about leadership,

Battles over territory.

Now we may be a less expressive, less volatile community,

But don't think such fights don't happen here.

As I was preparing for a church tour

I read up on our own history,

And found some interesting tidbits

In Bob Young's memoir:

"My Fifty Years at Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church."

Bob notes that upon returning from the war

He ended up settling at Kerrisdale Presbyterian

Where a certain chairman of the board

Was known to rule the community.

Talking of that chair and his wife he said:

"[they] were very strong willed people

who firmly believed they could run the whole Church

and I must say they gave it a good try."ⁱⁱ

He noted how this chairman expected

All the other members to join him

In the back pew during Sunday worship:

To be ready to usher, take the collection,

Or deal with an eventuality.

But this chairman didn't last forever.

Young notes that during the planning of the new church,

The chairman and his wife disappeared from the life

Of the community.

"I was never aware of what actually transpired,

but [they] seemed to vanish.

I am only able to speculate,

But I suspect they went a little too far

To impose their will on all church matters."ⁱⁱⁱ

The reality is that if you ever get involved in church

You realise that there are troubles in the family.

Rivalries and jealousies and feuds.
Maybe even assassinations!

But trouble in God's family
Is really nothing new.

Today as we continue in the Narrative Lectionary
We have moved on to the story of Joseph.

Joseph's is a well-known story
Popularised by Tim Rice & Andrew Lloyd Webber.^{iv}
It's a mainstay in any Sunday School curriculum.

A quick read might make you think
it's one of those rags-to-riches stories
where the hard work of the hero
helps them triumph over adversity.

But when you take a closer look
You'll realise that the story is more nuanced and complicated:
It highlights the brokenness of humanity.
It reveals the gracious work of God.

The narrative isn't particularly kind
To any of the characters,
To any of the family members.

The patriarch, Jacob
Is described as playing favorites:
"Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children...
and he had made him a long robe with sleeves."^v

To us, who buy mass-produced clothing,
Giving one's youngest a long robe
may not seem significant.

But in a world where cloth was hand-woven,
Where a person might have only one cloak,
This was a significant gift.

So much for a wise and fair father.

Jacob isn't careful how he treats his big family.
He lets the older sons share the battered work-truck,
And buys the youngest a Maserati.

This makes Joseph's brother's understandably jealous.
We are told that "they hated him,
And could not speak peaceably to him."^{vi}
Of course Joseph isn't very socially adept.
He comes across as pompous and conceited.

In a verse that was skipped over we are told
That when he was working with his brothers
He "brought a bad report of them
To his father."^{vii}

Not well-played for the youngest in the family.

And then when he has some strange dreams
That depict his superiority over his siblings—
Their sheaves of grain bowing to his in subservience—
He doesn't not keep this story a secret.

No he gathers his brothers together,
He dramatizes the story.
He proudly recounts these dreams.

Of course those brothers have secured their place
In infamy for letting their anger get the best of them.

When they have enough of Joseph,
The spoiled little tattler-tale,
They decide to do him in.

Reuben might seem heroic
In wanting to avoid bloodshed.
He's the one who suggests throwing Joseph into the well,
Instead of killing him.

But it is kindness or self-interest
 that motivates his suggestion?
 Returning Joseph to Jacob would give him points
 With the old man.

In the end the brother are less rash,
 more calculating in their plans to do-away Joseph.
 Instead of killing him,
 They sell him to a bunch of slave-traders,
 And pocket the cash.

But they keep Joseph's cloak
 And bloody it before returning it to their father.
 "Here dad, this is what we think of your favoritism!"

How's that for ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY?
 How could it get more dysfunctional?
 Everyone in his own way,
 is contributing to this mess.

Not the sort of folks that any of us
 Would chose for neighbors.
 And yet these are children of Abraham,
 The people through whom the whole world
 Is to be blessed!

Most of us wouldn't want
 To be associated with this family.

And in many ways it looks like God
 Has given up on them,
 Abandoned them to their worst inclinations:
 Their impartiality, their ego, their wrath.

And yet in the continuing story
 We see that God is caring for them,
 creating a good future for them,
 Despite their terrible acts.

Joseph ends up a slave all the way down in Egypt.
 And yet because of a God-given ability
 To understand dreams,
 he ends up being second-in-charge of all of Egypt.

This is good news for Joseph,
 But it is also good news for his dysfunctional family.

When famine hits the land they seek refuge in Egypt.
 Because of Joseph's good administration food is available.
 Because of the family connection,
 They are able to survive, even thrive.

But when Jacob, the patriarch dies,
 The uneasy peace is now questioned.
 Old hurts aren't easily forgotten.

And the brothers are worried that with their father gone,
 with the tables turned,
 and the youngest so powerful,
 Joseph will now pay them back.

And so they tell Joseph that their father
 Had given instructions that he should forgive them.
 And realising Joseph's not buying it,
 They throw themselves at his feet, crying:
 "We are here as your slaves".^{viii}

While revenge may be sweet
 Joseph has had lots of time to reflect
 During his sojourn in Egypt.

And while he still feels the pain
 Of the harmful intent of his brothers,
 He knows that God plans has had a greater effect.

"Even though you intended to do harm to me,
 God intended it for good,
 In order to preserve a numerous people,
 As he is doing today" he says.^{ix}

Joseph sees God at work
 Among his dysfunctional family.
 God brings good out of evil.
 In light of God's grace and goodness
 Joseph is able bless his brothers
 instead of curse them:

He tells them: "have no fear;
 I myself will provide for you
 And your little ones."^x

In our church family we sometimes see and experience
 The worst of human behavior:
 Impartiality and injustice,
 Ego and narcissism,
 Jealousy and vengeance.

It isn't all ONE BIG HAPPY FAMILY.
 And confronted with this reality
 Many choose to opt out.

And yet the incredible thing
 Is that God remains with us, even despite us,
 Creating a good future for us.

Don't believe it?
 Well we just heard it.

God makes his home with real people,
 Not just the good people we pretend to be,
 But the real people we are.

People like Jacob.
 People who lack wisdom in love
 And end up creating enmity.

People like Joseph.
 People who are proud and self-centered and stupid.

People like his brothers.
 People who are envious and bitter,
 Vindictive even violent.

God makes God's home
 With people like us,
 Working out plans to reconcile us
 And save us,

And make us a blessing for the entire world.

As one commentator has noted:
 "At the end of the story,
 as all through its many twists and turns,

God is at work to bring about the redemption
 of Joseph and his brothers,
 to bring reconciliation to this shattered family.

[The very same] God is still busy imputing goodness
 in the midst of all the intentional
 and unintentional harm that we do."^{xi}

Thanks be to God who never gives up on us.
 Thanks be to God whose good purposes will be achieved.

Amen.

ⁱ Sasha Jones "Brawl spills out into the street after church" March 21, 2016
www.wmctionews5.com/story/31529040/brawl-spills-out-into-the-street-after-church

ⁱⁱ Bob Young *My Fifty Years at Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church* (January 2003) 7

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid 11.

^{iv} see "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat"

^v Genesis 37:3 NRSV

^{vi} Genesis 37:4 NRSV

^{vii} Genesis 37:2 NRSV

^{viii} Genesis 50:18 NRSV

^{ix} Genesis 50:20 NRSV

^x Genesis 50:21 NRSV

^{xi} Timothy B. Cargal “Genesis 50:15-21, Homiletical Perspective” *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ)*.