

**The Rev. Victoria Kirk Mouradian  
Sermon for All Saints by-the-Sea  
Sunday, August 10, 2014**

**Readings: Proper 14 – Year A: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28; Romans 10:5-15; Matthew 14:22-33.**

**People behaving badly, a recurring theme in the Old Testament.** This morning's reading from Genesis certainly falls into that category. The situation presented is so bad that it could be mistaken for a summer beach read. We wonder, oh wonder, what will happen next. We've been hearing over the last few Sundays about the saga of Jacob, son of Isaac, grandson of Abraham. Thus far we have to wonder, "Ah, what was God thinking when he selected this family line to identify his chosen people? I know God uses saints and sinners to accomplish his work but sometimes the sinners are doozies. Let's reminisce. For example, Moses may have led his people out of Egypt but before that he murdered a man. While on their Exodus journey, God ironically instructed Moses to bring the Ten Commandments down from the mountain. David, considered the greatest king of Israel, had an adulterous affair with Bathsheba, the wife of one of his trusted soldiers. Wanting to make Bathsheba his own, David ordered his soldier, Uriah, to the front lines of battle to be killed in action. Two weeks ago we heard that Jacob's father-in-law, Laban, tricked Jacob into marrying his older daughter, when it was the younger one whom Jacob loved. When he eventually was able to take the younger as his second wife, you can just imagine their ensuing family dynamic. Today's reading gives us a peak at the aftermath.

**In the biblical world of family dysfunction,** today's story of Joseph and his brothers puts new meaning into the word *jealousy*. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob and the first-born of his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob did nothing to hide his feelings of favoritism for this son. He even singled him out by giving him an expensive coat with long sleeves, also known as a "coat of many colors." This

gesture put an even greater strain on the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. The brothers were shepherds and manual laborers and such a coat would not be worn doing such work, therefore suggesting that Joseph was above such labor.

**Joseph did not help the situation with his brothers.** In previous verses that we did not hear this morning, Joseph shared a dream with them in which they appeared to bow down to him. As the youngest son in a culture that held the oldest in highest regard, you can imagine how this went over. Joseph also had become a tattletale and reported his brothers' wrongdoing to their father. His brothers had come to hate him because their father loved him best and Joseph appeared to be arrogant in this position. It is not surprising that his tattletaling added fuel to the fire of family dissension.

**One day, Jacob sent Joseph to the area in which his brothers were tending the flocks.** The location was a few days away and well out of sight of their father. Seeing their brother coming from a distance, the brothers devised a plot to kill him. Reuben, the oldest son, did not approve and argued that Joseph should instead be thrown into a nearby cistern. His intention was to save his brother and return him to Jacob. The brothers agreed to this and proceeded to strip Joseph of his coat and drop him into the cistern. They must have been seething with hatred to condemn their brother to a miserable death by starvation or lack of water.

**Joseph's brother, Judah, came up with a better plan** to ease their guilt. As they sat at a meal, they observed a caravan of traders in the distance on their way to Egypt. Judah suggested that they sell Joseph into slavery to spare them the blood of their brother on their hands. Egypt was far away and the brothers would never need to be in contact with Joseph again. Unbeknownst to Reuben, Joseph was sold into slavery for twenty pieces of silver.

**You might ask at this point,** how on earth did God use this for his greater good? I don't want to spoil a good summer page turner but I will tell you that this story does set the stage for the Israelites to move to Egypt and the Lord's eventual action to free them.

**In our tale of jealousy today, the saying,** "What goes around comes around" comes to mind. If you look back to Jacob's experience with his father, you will find that Isaac favored Jacob's twin brother, Esau. Jealous of Esau being the first born twin, Jacob swindled Esau out of his birthright and lived on the run. He went to his uncle Laban and desired to marry his daughter Rachel. Because Rachel was the younger daughter, Laban swindled Jacob into marrying his first born daughter, Leah. When Jacob was able to finally marry Rachel and add her to his household, he in a sense swindled his other sons out of equal parental affection because he so blatantly favored Joseph, his son with Rachel. His sons in turn swindled Jacob out of a loving relationship with Joseph because they tricked him into believing his son was dead. Jealousy breeds hatred and hatred destroys.

**And what about favoritism?** What good could possibly come out of Isaac favoring Jacob, Laban favoring Leah, or Jacob favoring Joseph? Mind you, God can redeem all things but the bitterness and jealousy induced by such favoritism along the way causes such unhappiness and despair. This is not what God would intend. He would intend for us to love one another and live in community whether it be within a household, a church, a town, or a business. Favoritism can breed a false sense of importance in the one who is favored, a false security that can instill self-love, a self-love which can take all the blessings and give nothing in return. When equal love is withheld it can instill an equally false sense of worth, in this case a negative one of low self-esteem. Favoritism is destructive.

**Jealousy and favoritism do not play out any better** now than they did in biblical times. Think about it, the times we've seen it or the times we've experienced it. It's hard to watch and it's

hard to take. When we're dishing it out, if we're honest, we don't feel any better either. Reward can be given fairly and deservedly without alienating the clan. It can present an opportunity to help the rest of the clan grow if we can balance the reward for one, with the mentoring of others. Think, what would Jesus do?

**As I mentioned earlier in my sermon,** God uses saints and sinners to accomplish his greater good. Sometimes in our day to day lives, we are at a loss to understand his ways. A friend who I was ordained with had a very difficult internship while she was in seminary. Hers had been a later in life call to the priesthood and she was the same age as the rector who was to be her mentor. My friend was generous of heart and spirit, enthusiastic, joyful, humorous, well spoken, a straight A student, and probably one of the finest poster children for the love of Christ that I had ever known. She was almost too good to be true. Her call to the priesthood was obvious to anyone she met. She absolutely shined. None of these qualities seemed to stir the rector. She was never asked to be part of an altar party which meant she was never asked to be a Lay Eucharistic Minister, acolyte, crucifer, or reader. She may have been asked to preach twice but received no helpful critique, only a brief thank you. She was never asked to share in teaching, planning retreats, or planning liturgy. Her only job was to lead the Youth Group. In that she excelled but her internship was not balanced or preparatory for what lay ahead. She was never given any instruction or words of wisdom. When she asked if she could do something, the answer was always, "no," other arrangements had been made. She was loved by the parishioners and they were sad to see her go. She would never let her feelings be known at church but she would cry to me. She was hurt and frustrated and could make no sense out of the rector's unrelenting indifference. Finally, I said the words, "I think she's jealous of you." Her response was, "Why? What have I done?" I told her she didn't need to do anything. Her calling was so obvious and she was such a shining star that truly others could fade beside her. I also told her that if we did a little digging we might find out why.

**As it turned out we discovered that the rector** had had a very difficult time being heard in her previous denomination. She had been put through an insufferable ringer trying to answer a call to ordained ministry. She finally left her denomination, angry and frustrated. She eventually found her way to the Episcopal Church and there she was heard. Does her profile make her a bad priest? Absolutely not. She had many recognizable gifts and did a wonderful job in so many ways. But when confronted with the absolute naturalness of my friend and the apparent easy time she was having of it as a bright shining star for Jesus, the rector perhaps unconsciously began to replay her miserable experience. My friend rose above her ordeal and has become one of the finest priests I know. The rector in this scenario retired early. My friend learned that the love of God never left her side as an intern and she came out stronger and more focused than ever.

**What can we learn from our biblical characters this morning?** We can learn that if we give God his due, our love, and live by his ways, we can live a life of infinite freedom. We can be free to live in love and community; be the best we can be without jealousy or deceit. We can be free to let God guide us in whatever role suits us best and wisely utilize our individual gifts. We won't suffer from inflated egos, nor will we impose our egos on anyone. We will not constantly look over our shoulders in fear that our actions will come back to haunt us. We will be free to feel the beauty of caring for others and naturally desirous to make the world a better place. We will be free to be a source of inspiration to others, not a thorn in their sides. We will be free from going down in Judeo-Christian history as one of those characters who never gets it. Our life will be free from melodrama because we'll rise above it. Life will not be perfect and it will not be without sorrow; but it will be a life of integrity.

**Amen.**