

Least Known, Most Interesting: Reuben

Genesis 37 (various)

August 21, 2016

The story of Joseph is the single longest narrative in the Old Testament. I've heard it makes for great Broadway.

Today's passage is the beginning of the story. We learn that Joseph is Jacob's favorite son. We hear about Joseph's Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat. We discover the degree of his brothers' jealousy.

And since most of us are familiar with the story, we know how it turns out - with Joseph at the right hand of the Pharaoh, reconciling with his brothers, and providing for his family in the midst of a famine that has devastated the land.

What is kind of strange is that through the 13 chapters of this story God's role is hidden. Yet you get the sense that, somehow, God is involved. Through twists and turns, through bad choices and mistakes - God redeems the situation for good.

We know how the story ends. But this morning, I want to concentrate on what is before us. Specifically, I want us to consider the role that one of Joseph's brothers, Reuben, played in the story. Listen with me for the word of God in the 37th chapter of Genesis...

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Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose

and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words.

Now his brothers went to pasture their father’s flock near Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, ‘Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.’ He answered, ‘Here I am.’ So he said to him, ‘Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.’ So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

[His brothers] saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.’ But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, ‘Let us not take his life.’ Reuben said to them, ‘Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him’—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

When Reuben returned to the pit and saw that Joseph was not in the pit, he tore his clothes. He returned to his brothers, and said, “The boy is gone; and I, where can I turn?”

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Reuben is the oldest brother. The first-born.

For those of us who are first-borns like Reuben, we know what that means: Reuben is *responsible*. He is a *leader*. He is *much more mature* than the younger members of his family. Just ask any older sibling you know...it's a fact. Indisputable.

This story is a perfect example. It's not that Reuben doesn't feel the jealousy that his other brother's feel when it comes to Joseph. Certainly, he does. As the oldest, it would be absurd to think that the bulk of his father's affection would fall to this younger child.

But as Reuben overhears his brothers plotting to take out their jealous rage on Joseph by killing him, the older brother does what older brothers do: he exerts his *wisdom*. He brings some *sanity* into the situation. He may well identify with the feelings, but not the reaction. So he suggests a compromise: "let's not kill him...we'll just throw him in this pit. That way, we'll be rid of him, but we won't get his blood on our hands."

It seems clear that Reuben intended to do this so that he could go behind his brother's backs and rescue Joseph out of the pit to bring him back to his father Jacob. What is not so clear if our only context is this morning's reading is that Reuben has a reason to try to get back into his father's graces. A couple of chapters before (you can read it in Genesis 35:22), Reuben made a play to assume his father's power; an attempt that did not work or go well. Since then, he has been on the outs with Jacob. This Joseph episode provides a perfect opportunity to mend that fence.

Yes – Reuben is thinking like an older sibling. He's looking at all the angles: reestablish himself with his father, don't lose his popularity and power with his younger brothers...all of this plays into his decision to suggest that they throw Joseph into the pit.

It is a compromise. A shrewd option¹. An option that leaves lots of avenues open...avenues that serve Reuben's self-interest, but protect his conscience at the same time. We might call Reuben a pragmatist.

But how else might he have acted? How else could Reuben have used his influence as the eldest brother – the responsible brother – in the situation? Could it be that the better option would have been for Reuben to stand up and say “no!”?

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Ernest Hemmingway famously said that “courage is grace under pressure.” That makes a lot of sense to me – and it illustrates why being courageous is often so difficult.

Intuitively, I think most of us can distinguish between what is right and what is wrong. That, of itself, is evidence of grace. We see a picture of Omar Daqneesh, the little boy rescued from a bombed out building in Syria, and we know that it is wrong for innocent children to be in the crossfire of war. We see Wade van Neikirk, the Olympian from South Africa who won the gold and set a world record in the 400 meters, whose mother – once also an Olympic-caliber athlete, was not able to compete in the games because of the laws of Apartheid – and we know that the changes the world has made between then and now are right.

It is easy to see images on our computer or television screens and sort what is right from what is wrong. That kind of judgment doesn't require much from us. What is harder is when our reputation, our relationships, our future, and our way of life are all caught up in deciding between right and wrong. That's where the pressure comes. That is where courage is required.

Do I confront my boss about his unfair hiring practices?

Should I risk a good relationship by telling my friend that I am concerned she is drinking too much?

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Allan Boesak for his sermon, The Reuben Option, which I read many years ago in seminary and still informs my reading and interpretation of this text.

Does the fact that my kids are zoned for good schools
require me to do anything about those whose kids are not?
It's not a matter of knowing what is right and what is wrong – the hard
part is deciding what to do under pressure.

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There are plenty of examples of those in history who have made
different choices than someone like Reuben – people who have resisted
the easy road – who have taken their own well-being out of the equation
– who have used their influence the right way – in order to make a
courageous decision.

We count these people as heroes: Rosa Parks sitting down on a bus in
Montgomery, Dietrich Boenhoeffer standing up for his Christian faith in
Nazi Germany, the Nobel Peace prize winning Malala Yousafzai defying
the forces of terror in Pakistan.

Yet I would challenge us to not let the legends of these heroes
overshadow the acts of courage we see and make every day.

Like the 18 years of courageous decisions that it must take for a single
mother to drop off their child at college.

Or the interracial couple who celebrates their 50th wedding
anniversary.

Or the seventh grader who chooses to sit at a new table at
lunch because she's tired of the way her friends treat her
classmates.

Or the early-retired executive using their portfolio to
help start a non-profit.

All of these are acts of grace – of trust in the faithfulness of God – made
in the face of a pressure to dial back what we know to be right for the
sake of what might be less demanding and better for our self-interest.
We are surrounded by courageous acts like this every day.

And sometimes we choose that path.

And other times we choose the Reuben-option.

I asked a number of people this week to recall where they have made acts of courage or where they have made the opposite choice. By and large, most of the people I talked with recounted the times in their lives when they had the opportunity to choose the right thing, but they hesitated. I know for a fact that all the people I talked with have – by and large – made faithful decisions throughout their lives, but the memories that stuck were the times when they missed the mark.

Which, of course, is what it means to be human.

The Apostle Paul wrote: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not what I want, but the very thing I hate.”

This is the struggle that we face as people of faith, as members of the body of Christ, the Church...as people who stake our lives on the promise of the resurrection. We are a mixed bag. Aware, by and large, of what is right. Yet trapped by our inability to act on what we know is right.

The question – always before us, individually and collectively – is where does God call us to exercise courage? And to examine where our compromises for the sake of what we consider “possible,” or “appropriate,” or “respectable” get in the way of us living up to the vision that God has for our lives?

And, good gracious, is that a tough struggle. A life-long struggle. But it is a struggle that is built upon two important truths:

First, as the stories of scripture and our lives attest, God has a long history of using our imperfect and compromise-riddled choices for the sake of God’s purposes.

And, second, and most importantly, we are not the church of Reuben. We are the church of Jesus Christ.²

The Jesus, who - in his own life - stood for what was right, chose courage, and never counted the cost.

The Jesus who, by his grace, gathered – and gathers – those who are his disciples to equip us to bear witness to the good news of God’s coming kingdom.

² Again, a line from Boesak’s sermon.

A kingdom where not one person is ever a casualty of compromise.