

With the Children: Joseph received special treatment from his father, something that is not fair but often happens. What might Joseph have done differently in the way he talked and acted to his brothers that might have been more caring or loving towards them?

Reason Enough

It is so easy to claim what is and what is not God's "will"; as it is to hear the call to "fear not" as an admonishment against fear rather than a word of hope for fearful times. Many times I have heard and read Jesus nicknaming Peter as "ye of little faith" with a disappointing, chastising tone.

There is a tendency to look at stories, scriptural and historic, and rather than seeing the on-going human interaction and options fused with God's presence and goodness, to see a prewritten "script" where God has authored and then directed the words, actions and outcome. Then we wonder why and how these stories should have any relevance to life as we experience it today. One could look at the story of Joseph and then pray that they might not be chosen by God! Yes Joe has a few good, grand moments, yet also a lot of pain, heartache and danger.

The portion of Joseph's story we hear today is not a pleasant story. It is a nasty story of people behaving horribly. A father who plays favorites, who asks his sons to spy on and "rat out" one another, who provides for his family at a wal-mart level, yet shops for one son at Macy's. Brothers, who taunt, tattle, tussle, and then trade off one of their own, as well as lie without hesitation to their father. A life turned upside down in the blink of an eye. I wonder if the Godly call to "fear not" would have meant much to young Joe in the pit. Can any human say with certainty that this behavior by the other sons of Jacob was the will of God, the plan of God? Are they without fault because it worked out in the end? I would venture to say no, and in saying no, this story becomes much more relevant. I want us to pause for a moment and ask each of you to place yourself in this segment of the Joseph story. Have you struggled with envy so deep that the humanity of that "other" faded from your view? Have you felt that you were bound and thrown into circumstances and situations which were totally unfair and in which you had no power, no options and no sense of God's presence or protection? Have there been times when you acted based on your own preferences with no regard to the impact such actions would have on the interrelationships of others?

This not so ancient story speaks to us today as it prepares us for facing the realities of life and digging deep into our beliefs so that we might find ways to be Godly in the midst. So that through our godliness God's desire might be more fully realized and

God's will be understood not as the opposite of free will and personal responsibility but as priorities, purpose and attitude as captured in Micah 6:8 as "what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God." Imagine how differently this story had been if any or all of the "players' actions had sprang from a cord of justice, mercy and humility.

Jesus called us to this same understanding of godliness as he called all to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" This commandment is not a litmus test to show our failures, it is encouragement to strive to focus our lives not on the situations and circumstances around us but on the promise that God is with us, always. God is with us when we can feel the power, love and hope and God is with us when the storms and waves seem to overtake us.

There are a lot of similarities between today's stories. Joseph, his brothers and the disciples find them selves in danger, physical, emotional and spiritual. Jesus left the disciples. Those of you who recall last week's message may remember that Jesus had sought an opportunity to be alone with his grief and questions following news of the beheading of John the Baptist, his cousin, his baptizer, his forerunner in ministry. After a day of interruptions that time away has come, Jesus is near, just up a mountain near the shoreline, yet not in the center of the disciples.

A storm comes and the disciples ask not what should they do, but ask how will Jesus take care of them? Notice there is not mention of checking on or helping the multitudes which may have been still homeward bound following their amazing supper. No mention of Jesus alone on the shore. Shall we pause to find ourselves in this story?

God's presence is made known, through the appearance of Jesus walking on the water. What an image of the extremes God goes through to both stay at our sides and to encourage us to open our eyes to God's presence! Of course this manifestation of God is questioned. I have been struck over and over again as I've pondered, prayed and prepared how easy we see and claim God's presence and actions in what has happened and how seldom it is embraced in the midst.

The story continues and soon Peter is named as "little faith". I can relate to that, as I can easily echo the words of the father who responded to Jesus with "I believe, help my unbelief". It is hard in the midst of the storm, whatever storms we face, to be chided for our fears, our very human doubts. Yet it is possible, I think probable, that this naming was not done by Jesus in judgment. "Little faith" is an affirmation of faith.

It acknowledges that Peter did step out. It offers a kernel for Peter to glimpse the possibility of faithfulness for the future.

This is where I find the "good news" the relevant word of God for this moment in time. There are fearful, dangerous things in the world, there always will be. There is unfairness, envy and brokenness which pepper our relationships with others. Those aspects of life have not changed from the days of Joseph and Peter. Yet, by the grace of God, we are given opportunities to work for justice, to show mercy and to walk humbly, and in doing so to more fully know the presence and love of God.

As we open our hearts to accept that God does allow free will and invites us to embrace responsibility for our choices, God's spirit brings a renewed and growing sense of our relationship and value in God's eyes. This gives us the peace and joy which we all yearn for. We can hear the call to "fear not" as a reminder of God's love and know that we "little faiths" can trust in God regardless of what we experience.

Jesus holds out his hand, today just as on the stormy sea, that hand may not still the storm or remove us from it. It will give us the strength and faith we need not only to weather the storm but to then reach out in Christ's name to others. This hand will not lead us into a life where everything is scripted and directed by God, it will lead us into joining in God's loving, redeeming, creative, transforming work.

Today, and each day may we celebrate that God is God, and name that we know we need to focus all of our lives on God, not to escape life but to embrace life, all of life, life in Christ's name. Let us pray:

Lord, you know us so well. You know how easy it is for us to come to you and to proclaim loudly of our faith when all is going well. But when the waters get rough and the waves threaten our little boats, we cry and wail in fear. WE are sure that these waves will be the very things that destroy us. We are so used to getting lots of reassurances and written guarantees of safety. But still you call to us. Help us to take our focus off the wind and the waves and place our gaze directly on you. Attune our hearts and our lives to hear your call and to respond in faith. For we offer this prayer in the name of Jesus. Amen