

Sunday - October 11, 2009

Pastor - Rev. Paula P. Werner

Sermon - **Cornucopia Kids and the World's Kids**

Scripture: Genesis 37

"Let us pray" May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be formed by your grace, for you are our Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Scripture summation: The Old Testament passage for today gives us the chance to look at Joseph, one of Jacob's 12 sons. Today begins the first of a 3 part sermon series focusing on Joseph and what his story can teach us.

Joseph was the 11th son of Jacob by his favorite wife, Rachel. Jacob spoiled the young boy. He showed favoritism to him, even making him an expensive coat, which constantly reminded his brothers that he was the favorite. It was probably different colors because it was made from different materials. It apparently had long sleeves. It would have been difficult for him to do hard manual labor in such a coat (more favoritism). Jacob had learned nothing about what favoritism does. He had forgotten how it made him feel when his own father, Isaac, treated his own brother Esau as the favorite over Jacob.

Besides being spoiled, Joseph was also a tattler. He would spy on his brothers and when they did not do something right with the flock, he would tell his father. Add to this the dreams he had in which he sees his brothers and even the heavens bowing down to him, and you have an explosive situation. His brothers hated him.

The drama

"It's the Pits" song

Every year, together with many churches across America, we celebrate Children's Sabbath. It is a Sunday we set aside to ponder our relationships with children, their place in our culture, and God's desire for all his children. Today, we're using the story of Joseph as a young boy and teen as a vehicle for looking at what God desires for our families, for our children and the problems we run into. Joseph's family was not a perfect family, so we have something in common with him already, for none of us grew up in nor currently live in perfect families – they are all imperfect to some degree.

Let's first think about Joseph's character. As the O.T. book of Genesis, chapter 37 begins Joseph's story – he does not come out looking too good. He was his father's favorite, partly because his mother was his father's favorite wife and also because Joseph was born when his father Jacob was an old man. We know Jacob played favorites between his sons --- for he gave this youngest son a special coat. Not just any coat but a coat with long sleeves. What's the big deal about that? Well, if you have a coat with long sleeves, you can't do they physical work as easily as when you are wearing a sleeveless tunic. So Jacob is assuring that Joseph will not be pulling his fair share of the work duty – that will not endear him to his brothers. Joseph was spoiled. He was indulged. While his brothers were out in the fields working, Joseph was back with his father and the women.

Rachel and Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah – don't you just imagine that whatever young Joseph wanted, he could wile and whine out of one of Joseph's wives or another? Joseph was a dreamer. Now being a dreamer can certainly be positive; it can be the impetus for doing great things. And Joseph had vivid dreams. When his dreams were interpreted as elevating himself over his brothers, and them bowing down to him – well, a sensible, prudent person would keep those dreams to himself. Joseph did not and his brothers grew to hate him. Joseph was NOT evil; he was just misguided in the way he was so self-absorbed and the way he interacted with his family.

I don't know if we should give full blame to Joseph for this. The parenting of his father certainly led to the break-down of this family. Favoritism, and the envy, jealousy that comes from it can break up the family unit. That's what happened to Jacob's family.

Frankly, Joseph was a cornucopia kid. Although that term was not coined until the 1980s by psychologist Bruce Baldwin, I think we could easily apply it retroactively to Joseph. (HOLD up cornucopia) A cornucopia is a horn-shaped receptacle overflowing with fruits and vegetables. It is a symbol indicating abundance. Cornucopia kids are children who grow up in homes where the good life is available for the asking, and where no personal effort is required. In other words, the child has an unprecedented amount of stuff with little or no responsibility for acquiring it, caring for it, or replacing it. Joseph was a cornucopia kid – he was not asked to labor as his brothers were and was given the gift of a robe that was meant to set him apart – to indicate he was the favorite in his father's eye. Joseph was given this just because his father, now in his old age, had the money to provide the coat, and wanted to, irrespective of the problems this would cause.

As we think about Joseph's story and Jacob's parenting problems, we would do well to see what lessons this troubled family brings to our own. Do you suspect your own child or niece or nephew or grandchild might be a cornucopia kid? What are the danger zone warnings? Let me suggest a few:

- When you go to the mall, you buy your 2 yr old some candy or a toy as a payoff to keep her from crying.
- Your pre-schooler has already been on a cruise or stayed at an expensive resort.
- Your middle school daughter regularly gets her nails done.
- There's never a quiet moment in your home because the TV or computer or music are always on, and a battle ensues if you try to turn them off.
- You personally do without new towels or a special night out to buy your child an outrageously priced pair of jeans.

I'm hoping that you are shocked by these cornucopia kid signs and none apply to you and your child. If that's the case, you could certainly have taught Jacob a lesson or two about child rearing of Joseph.

If not, and if you're thinking, "oh boy, patriarch Jacob and I need some new parenting helps..." then here are 5 suggestions to add to your parenting tool box to begin getting control of the cornucopia kid:

- 1) give age-appropriate work responsibilities beginning in the preschool years
 - 2) don't give too many freebies. Create the link for your child between effort and reward. Don't be afraid to say, "we can't afford that."
 - 3) Limit TV time and computer game time. Relying on external stimulation to entertain suppresses the imagination.
 - 4) Simplify birthdays and holidays. Limit the number of gifts your child receives. Put the emphasis on experiencing activities together such as a trip to a water park or aquarium.
 - 5) Teach your child to share with others. A good practice is to let go of something old before something new is acquired.
- (from Cornucopia Kids: by Dr. Lauren Bradway)

There is no magic pill or to-do list that will rectify an out-of-control parenting situation overnight. But these 5 suggestions will help keep your child from being as spoiled and indulged as Joseph, and thus as self-centered and arrogant as he.

Because of father Jacob's errors in the way he dealt with his large brood of sons, Jacob helped set up sibling rivalry that got out of hand. Sibling rivalry is normal, but when it gets to the point where siblings are considering killing or abducting and selling off a brother, we're got a family that has fallen apart. That's what happened in Jacob's family. His 10 older sons wanted to get rid of this nuisance brother who just reminded them continually that their father, Jacob, loved Joseph more than Jacob loved them. No matter our age, we want to be loved by our parents. No matter our age, we do not outgrow wanting our parent's good will, their pride in us, their unconditional love. The clothes, toys, money often get in the way of giving what our children most need from us --- ourselves, our time, our unconditional love.

Every day in this country ---- this wonderful, abundantly blessed, free, opportunity -laden country - every day there are parents who do not do their job. These parents - for a whole host of reasons which do not make sense or are just plain flaky - these parents do not fulfill their job as parents. They function far worse than Jacob did. These parents anger us in their dereliction of duty. Because of their own cornucopia outlook, they focus on their own selfish needs, and let their children fend for themselves. This happens right here in these wonderful United States of America.

Because parents are not fully on duty in their parenting job: here's what is happening to children --- right now in America. Here are the "pits" our American children are in:

- Every 11 sec. a high school student drops out
- Every 33 seconds a baby is born into poverty
- Every 35 seconds a child is confirmed as abused or neglected
- Every 39 seconds a baby is born without health insurance

Every minute a baby is born to a teen mother
Every 4 minutes a child is arrested for a drug offense
Every 7 minutes a child is arrested for a violent crime
Every 3 hours a child or teen is killed by a firearm
Every 5 hours a child or teen commits suicide
Every 6 hours a child is killed by abuse or neglect.

I've cited these statistics in terms of seconds, minutes, hours..... did you do the math? Did you calculate that 4 children are killed by abuse or neglect every 24 hr day in America? Did you do the math that 18 children or teens are killed by a firearm every 24 hr. day in America? Did you do the math and realize that 1,839 babies are born without health insurance every 24 hr. day in America?
(statistics and information from Children's Sabbath materials, Children's Defense Fund)

If this information makes you squirm, is unsettling, then good. That shows that you've still got a conscience that can be offended. These statistics should offend caring people. I believe Jesus would be offended by these statistics. Jesus said, "Let the little children come unto me, for of such is the kingdom of heaven." Jesus' words aren't some sweet, sappy words about children sitting on his knee. Jesus means let the children come into all the goodness of life that he wants to provide. You see, the kingdom of heaven is the best, the most perfect, the time of God's reign. Jesus wants the little children to enter into that. Children dropping out of school, being abused, neglected, having babies themselves, doing drugs, using firearms, committing suicide – this is living in "the pits" NOT in the kingdom of God.

What are you and I to do? I've offered a few suggestions about parenting with our kids who have the world at their feet and our checkbooks and VISA credit over-extended on their behalf. Our children need our best parenting practices if we want them to have the values and character that will serve them well in life and will help them to be Godly people of faith and service. So we must be vigilant about our own children, nieces and nephews, grandchildren. We and our children need to know and to live the Bible verse, "those to whom much is given, much is required." We are blessed; we are to bless generously others with who we are and with sacrifice and service --- "those to whom much is given, much is required" does not mean that we are to run up our credit cards.

But what about the nation's ills and the world's ills when it comes to children -- children who are "in the pits". We who are privileged, healthy, secure need to be willing to look at the suffering of children who go without the health care they need and endure pain unrelieved, illness untreated, suffering unabated. We need to have our eyes opened to the fact that children suffer in poverty through no fault of their own, that many are born into a pipeline to prison, with the odds stacked against them before they can even comprehend what that means. This kind of suffering is preventable and needless --- in this wondrous of all countries in the world, we can do so much more to get children out of "the pits."

We can, or we can just turn away – hide our eyes, pretend that this does not impact our lives, that this is not what "spirituality" is all about. We can do that, but we certainly won't find Jesus that way. For Jesus is back in the pits of

these children's lives. And he's asking you and me to do something. Let me offer a few ideas for your consideration:

1) the easiest is always to write a check, to give money --- and we've provided you the easy means to do that --- for United Methodist Family Services which helps foster children and adopted children & families right here in Fredericksburg

2) a harder, and more time-consuming way to help children "in the pits" is to find one cause, one group, one outreach that helps children and devote yourself to it— for years.... your lifetime. It might be Boys and Girls' Club, the Y programs, Childhelp, All God's Children camps, there are countless opportunities.

3) an even harder way to help children "in the pits" is to change the structures and systems that are hurting and failing children. This is a more difficult and more long-term project for us, because it means educating ourselves more in the REAL facts of what it means to be a child "in the pits" and not just take the easy justification that "that's all they deserve, they're immigrant, or indigent, or children of welfare cheats". Yeah, this type of learning might cause us to change our viewpoints --- and thus cause us to want to change structures and systems that continue to harm children. So THIS is definitely the hardest way to help children "in the pits." But a few of you might like to take on a hard task.

As a summation of what we've considered this morning..... we began with Joseph with his story of family privilege and favoritism, envy and jealousy which brought Joseph's downfall and the fracturing of the family. Hopefully, we have come to the conclusion that if **we ourselves are** cornucopia parents – those adults who begrudge the wealth we have and do not want to share with others, then we have some personal work to do. If we are **raising** cornucopia kids, we have some work to do, some changes to be made. For there is nothing in Jesus' teachings that supports the self-indulgence of cornucopia living. Jesus' words were continually about loving, serving and giving to others, reminding us that inasmuch as we do these good acts to others – particularly the least, last, lost and lonely, we have done to Jesus.

I hope I've given you some things to think about this Children's Sabbath, and I hope there is a conviction in your heart. Let me conclude with this quote --- "A hundred years from now it will not matter the kind of house I live in, what my bank account totals or the kind of car I drive. But the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child."

So be it.