

“Pride and Prejudice” Joseph Story Part One

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Genesis 37: 1-2a, 3-8, 12-13, 17b-28 CEV

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A number of years ago – I think 5 now, how time flies!– my daughter Anna was training for a 400-meter race. We decided we’d go out to the new track at TISS and help her train. It then turned into a family race, in particular between me and Anna. We were talking smack all the way to the track. (You’re going down! You’re going to eat my dust! ... that kind of thing.) I was in half-decent shape at the time. I had done a couple of triathlons which focus more on endurance than speed (these days the focus of my triathlon is more like survival than speed). I thought I had a chance at beating Anna. Truth told, I was sure I could beat her.

We set out and with a lot of fun and a lot of excitement the race started. It was the most humiliating defeat. I was probably only 50 meters in when I knew I was in trouble. It was so bad that around the 300 mark I just stopped dead. Anna didn’t know how bad it was – she did the right thing and just kept running her heart out without looking back. I wanted to just give up, but I made myself start running again and finish the race. It was so bad that my son Stanley, instead of laughing at me and making fun of me (I was expecting that kind of “Ha, ha mom, you went down!”), he just looked at me very seriously and earnestly and said “Mom, I feel *so bad* for you.” You know it’s bad when you get genuine pity from your kids.

We had another family race this year at TISS and 5 years later we’re all eating Stanley’s dust – though there was no big surprise there. But I tell you, Heath family, meet me in the pool and you’ll all be choking on my waves!

Proverbs 16:18 says: “***Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall.***” How many of you know that verse? In other words when you get too ‘up and high’ on yourself, there is often a crash that follows it. What goes up must come down.

I don’t know if you’ve ever gone from puffed up and proud to humiliated and defeated, but Joseph from our scripture reading sure did.

It’s a bit of a complicated and dysfunctional family history but just to recap a couple of details: little Joseph reminds his father, Jacob, of the woman he loved, and so Jacob favours Joseph and everyone knows it. The brothers know it and Joseph knows it.

Joseph not only flaunts his fashionable coat of many colours that his doting dad gave him; he foolishly tells his brothers about his dreams where they all bow down to him. He is also a total tattle-tale.

At one point it says that when they are doing their shepherding work he brings his father 'a bad report' about his brothers. (Gen 37:2) Let's face it – the only one who liked Joseph was his dad. You wouldn't have liked him either. People like that are often insufferable.

Most of us have met entertainers or leaders or 'ordinary people' where you just have a sense that the sun and the moon revolve around them and the only thing they care about is me, myself and I.

There are a couple of nuclear weapon-toting world leaders that come to mind. At the very least it's sad and pathetic, and at the most it's dangerous and frightening.

The funny thing is that for Joseph there is a kernel of truth in how he thinks of himself. As we read on in the story it's pretty clear that he has great leadership and administrative gifts, and God really did have big plans for him. Those dreams were true, just not in the way that Joseph imagined. In the beginning Joseph had it partly right but mostly wrong.

The American Pastor, John Ortberg says that we all have a mission and we all also have a *Shadow Mission*. A shadow mission is what you would drift into naturally in life without consciously seeking out God's mission. The Shadow mission is your authentic mission which has been hijacked by your ego and your fears. It is self-centered by nature instead of God-centered. John Ortberg says that he has known what his shadow mission is for almost his whole life. At the age of 10 he gave some kind of a speech and his local small-town paper wrote a little story on it. The headline of the story was "Talkative Boy Wins Acclaim". John Ortberg has a marvelous gift of speaking and preaching, and obviously there is nothing wrong with that. In fact it's wonderful. It is his mission as well as his shadow mission. You see, when his gift is used to further the Kingdom of God and to build others up it is a wonderful God-given mission. It is powerful and good when broken people feel encouraged by that gift and discouraged people feel inspired and motivated. But it would be just plain sad if John were to use that gift purely for himself so that others could look at him and say 'Wow, what a great speaker!' and continually feed his ego, increase his fame and help him to get rich like some shallow televangelist.

I suspect that's where Joseph was in his early teenage years, living fully in his shadow mission. Living for himself and full of himself.

As Christians we are called to a life of humility and not a life of pride. Jesus was an amazing example of a humble life. What is humility? Well

let's start with what humility is not. There is a side of humility that can be as much a sin and as dangerous as pride can be. Remember that sin is anything that separates us from God and from community (from the people of God). When humility crosses over into an attitude that says "I'm no good,. I'm worthless," then it becomes a sin.

We all probably know someone who has a 'poor me' mentality. Think of Eeyore in Winnie the Pooh. Eeyore is always putting himself down because he thinks he's no good. Eeyore has low self-esteem and is always feeling left out. Some might look at Eeyore and say he's humble, but he's not. You were made in the image of God and when you fail to see that, when you doubt that you were fearfully and wonderfully made and created for a purpose, that's a problem, not a virtue.

Often people yo-yo between those two extremes of self-conceit and no self-worth, between "Look at me!" and "Don't look at me, may the darkness hide me". I don't doubt that there were times in Joseph's life after he was sold into slavery, or after he was wrongly accused and imprisoned and forgotten, that he probably started believing he was nothing. His brothers, his boss and life in general had treated him incredibly unfairly. There was a very real potential of going from being sure that he was better than the others to getting stuck in a pit of "why me/poor me". Both are sad and dangerous, and both keep us from the presence of God and from doing what we were created to do.

So then to what kind of life are we Christians called? The Franciscan Theologian, Richard Rohr, says that one of our biggest tasks in life is to die to our **small self** and be born into our **true self**. Jesus said: "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." John 12:24

Our small self is focused on our little needs and is filled with fear and insecurity. It might be filled with self-conceit or self-loathing or both at the same time, but it is fearful and tunnel-visioned. When we die to our small selves, to our insecurities and needs to be validated by the world, and instead draw on the love of God to fill us and build us up, **then we are set free**. When we sacrifice our own dreams for God's dreams we go from a tiny seed to incredible growth. When we go from "My will be done" to "Thy will be done" we change ourselves and we change the world. God's dream and plan and hope for our life is so much bigger than anything we could dream. But you can't take up God's dream until you are ready to sacrifice your own.

We often associate humility with weakness. Humility is a strength and not a weakness. God may call you to serve in what seem to be small ways

that no one notices, or he may call you to serve in ways that the world sees as big.

There will be times when we will be called to “shrink,” and there will be times when you are called to “shine” for a higher purpose.

There are times when God calls us to step back and play a supportive roll so that others can shine. There are times when we need to live and focus on the first part of the Serenity Prayer: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change.”

However, when we die to our small self and are born into the fullness of life in Jesus, there will be other times when we will be called to step out and to make a difference to lead and to shine.

Joseph had the opportunity to shine when he ended up being the 2nd in command to the Pharaoh of Egypt and when he saved his family and the budding nation of Israel from starvation. His leadership had a totally different quality than when he was dreaming and prancing around in his colourful coat as a teen. Through all of the struggle he was able to die to his small self and be born to the larger dream God had for him.

I believe that the work of justice, of seeing and advocating for the needs of the poor and the marginalized all come out of a dying to the small self and living in your true self – living into God’s calling. There are so many examples of that kind of living from big names we know, like Mother Theresa or Martin Luther King Jr. to ordinary people we know right here in this congregation who just have the love of God in them and make a difference as a result.

For some reason St. Lawrence, for whom our river is named after, came to mind this week. He was a Deacon in Rome around the year 250 AD. He was in charge of the finances of the church. At one point a period of persecution broke out and the Emperor Valerian ordered all bishops, priests and deacons to be arrested and executed. But he offered Lawrence a way out if Lawrence would simply show him where the treasures of the church were located and hand them over. Lawrence asked for three days to gather it all into one central place. And then he brought together the blind, poor, disabled, sick, elderly, widows and orphans. When Valerian arrived he flung open the door and said: ‘These are the treasures of the church!’

Valerian was furious, and ordered that Lawrence be roasted on gridiron. And so he was martyred on August 10th 258 AD. Legend has it that in the middle of it he joked to one of his executioners: ‘You may turn me over. I’m done on this side.’ His courage made such an impression that

many became Christian as a result, including several senators who witnessed his execution.

I don't think many of us will be Lawrences. But I can tell you he could not have done that unless he had died to that small, fearful, survival-focused self and instead focused on God's call and God's love for the treasures of the church.

I was so grateful this week to hear of the Toronto Pastor Hyeon Soo Lim's release from North Korea. I have been praying for him for years, and really had begun to lose hope that Canada could ever negotiate his release. We don't know exactly what happened and why they decided to imprison him, but we do know that he had made over 100 trips to North Korea in the past 20 years to help establish and support an orphanage and a nursing home. Most of us would see traveling to North Korea as a pretty dumb thing to do and maybe it was – I'm not recommending it! But I can only imagine that the only reason he could have done it was because of his love of God and his love for what God loves most: people; ordinary and especially suffering people.

It is truly amazing what life can come to you and to countless others when you die to your small self and are born anew in Jesus. Jesus emptied himself for us. May we empty ourselves of our self-focus to make room for the Holy Spirit to fill us with love and everlasting life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.