

EMPTY EVIL

Genesis 37

7 August 2011

I am going to quote Paul Blankenship today. Paul is the first person I heard say that when a speaker at a funeral says of someone, “He was like a brother to me,” you can be sure the speaker is an only child. Siblings are the only people who can totally love and tremendously hate the same person at the same time. This leads us to a simple observation; things are not always what they appear to be. When they are not, betrayal and the resulting loss of home are at play.

Home is the place where we are supposed to be safe. Home is where we can explore ideas and hopes and dreams and not have them crushed callously. Betrayal by those of our home is about the worst spiritual abuse that we can experience. Betrayal in the home is especially



destructive as it shakes your core trust in human nature. Dare I ever trust anyone if a family member betrays me? Perhaps a better response is to become cold and calculating, looking at people as objects, staying only with the few I depend to be relatively safe and not opening myself to anyone not in my tight, closed off in-group. This is what Joseph goes through.

Joseph’s relationship with his brothers is not what it appears to be. Joseph is Daddy Jacob’s favorite. There are cases where having a favorite among your children is acceptable. The woman with five was asked by a reporter to name her favorite child. Finally the mother said, “Well, I’ll tell you. My favorite child is the one who needs me the most at a given moment.”

That was not the case with Jacob and Joseph. The writer of Genesis clues us in to the special relationship between this father and this son. The passage begins, “This is the story of Jacob’s family.” Then we hear about Joseph:

- Joseph has older brothers. Joseph tells Daddy Jacob when his brothers are not working as hard as they might if he, Joseph were in charge. For some reason this bothered his brothers.
- Jacob gives Joseph a coat that, when wearing it, Joseph could not possibly work in the fields. Joseph loved to wear the coat. For some reason this bothered his brothers. ¹
- Joseph has several dreams where his brothers symbolically bow down to him. For some reason this bothers his brothers. ²

Bothered, Joseph’s brothers take the three steps that lead to betrayal. First, they deny that Joseph is even human. They call him an object, “The Dreamer.” Names, as I mentioned last week, can help or hurt, build a person up or tear a person down. We see it in all the name calling

¹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Bze0A1ewos>

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmY2v7YLMC8>

that happens when individuals or groups are divided. Joseph's brothers deny that he is human; they call him only by an object name.

Second, the brothers do not talk with Joseph. They only talk at him. When we are moving toward betrayal, we close ourselves off from the person who is our target. Betrayers do not want to be in communication with the person in their sights. Communication, honest conversation, open discussion, vulnerable speech that looks to find truth, not make a point or win an argument, is essential to keeping the home alive, the family healthy. Joseph's brothers talk only to themselves. They know that way that what is said will re-enforce what they already think.

Third, with the stage set by turning a person into an object, by cutting off communication with the target, the betrayers act to kill. Joseph's brothers wish to actually kill him. Ruben, for reasons known only to him stops that. The brothers instead sell Joseph to some passing slave traders and faster than you can say "Visit Egypt, land of the Pyramids," Joseph has a one way ticket to the slave pits of the Nile. They make a little spending money off the deal. Death from betrayal can be real, physical death. These days it more often the loss of a job, dropped from a group of former friends, divorce papers or some other relationship break.

Joseph's brothers betray him because they hate him. "Hatred," wrote C. S. Lewis's *Screwtape to Wormwood*,³ "is often the compensation by which a frightened man reimburses himself for the miseries of Fear. The more he fears, the more he will hate." Joseph's brothers really fear Joseph's truths. The brothers really have not done all they could to tend the wealth of the home. Possibly they really will all wind up bowing down to Joseph. They fear him. They fear his truth. Rather than deal with the truth that Joseph tells, they betray him. The home that looked so strong, so impressive is not what it seems. In fact it is broken and divided and at risk.



Hear then, the gospel, the good news in the face of all this betrayal and death and brokenness. What Joseph claimed as truth is true. Joseph's stewardship is better than his brothers. They will all learn that when the brothers have to come to Egypt to buy the food that Joseph has carefully preserved for a time of need. Second, his brothers will bow down to him. The little brother will grow into a great ruler. Even more, Joseph will grow into a great ruler who is strong enough to be merciful. He has no need to pay back betrayal with betrayal. Joseph learns the truth: what goes around comes around. He will send mercy and forgiveness into the world and trust that it increases.

If betrayal begins when we turn people into objects, Joseph learns the gospel truth, healing begins when we see categories of people as individuals. If betrayal is set in motion when we talk only among an in group, this brother but not that sister, then Joseph talks to everyone. Finally, if betrayal is when we hold back what the other person needs, Joseph will provide food, love and home for those who offered him none of it.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Screwtape_Letters

What of us? In your family are things not what they seem to be? In your marriage, at work? The Joseph story shows us a way to keep home whole, alive and healthy. We repay the betrayals done to us with forgiveness. We open our arms and our lives to welcome those who shut us out. We trust that God is with us, drawing straight with our crooked lines. We stay close to the source of strength we need desperately. We stay close to the scripture, to one another and to the sacrament of holy communion that feeds us, restores us and offers healing for our wounds. In that way, we recover from betrayal. We discover that evil really is empty. Evil gives us nothing that lasts, nothing that builds and nothing that grows. Forgiveness, openness and welcome let us build a home where things really are as they appear to be.

