

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Proper 14A, Genesis 1-4, 12-28 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

This morning's passage opens with the fulfillment of a dream: Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, in the land of Canaan.

Canaan. The promised land! It appears that God's promise to Abraham is now fulfilled, when he promised this land to Abraham and his many descendants. Jacob is the younger son of Isaac, the one who was nearly sacrificed. Jacob is back in this land after he fled because he stole his brother's blessing.

That would be a satisfying end to the story! But it's not. Now we have the beginning of the Joseph stories in Genesis. And not only is this the beginning of Joseph's story: it's not the end of Jacob's.

Think about your life, especially when there's something you've waited a long time for. Maybe you graduated, as many did last June! But graduation isn't the end of the story: it's the beginning of another one. Or, think of one of the favorite stories here at St. David's: the Building of the Parish Hall. When I first got here and met other area clergy, they would say of St. David's, "Oh, we watched your parish hall go up!" And that was a great story! This small church in the woods built a beautiful structure, fulfilling a dream! But that wasn't the end of our story.

Or think about Dr. Martin Luther King Junior's I have a dream speech. That wasn't the end of a story either. It was a dream, like the Promised Land. The Civil Rights Act was passed in 1964. That wasn't the end of the story either.

You may have noticed that some verses are missing from today's story. That's the problem when we try to fit the fifty chapters of Genesis into a few weeks of the summer: we have to skip a lot of it.

In those removed verses, Joseph has dreams, which he shares with his family. In one of the dreams, he and his brothers were out in the field gathering wheat, and his brothers' bundles of wheat bowed down to Joseph's bundle. This really ticked off his brothers, who accused him of trying to boss them around.

Then Joseph shared another dream, in which the sun, moon and eleven stars all bowed down to Joseph. This time, his father rebuked him for all these dreams.

Now, I'm not saying that Joseph's dreams merited his brothers conspiring to kill him, throwing him into a pit, and selling him into slavery. No. But, the missing pieces are important in understanding Joseph's brothers' jealousy. Not that jealousy is ever rational. But they know Joseph is their father's favorite. Their father has shown that. Joseph is the beloved Rachel's first son. Rachel was barren for a long time, and watched her sister—the one Jacob married accidentally a couple weeks ago—she watched her sister give birth to six sons and a daughter. Both Rachel's handmaid and Leah's handmaid also gave birth to two of Jacob's sons.

And then *finally*, there was Joseph. We heard in the reading today that he's the favorite because he's the son of Jacob's old age. He's younger than his brothers, and he's adored. He was long awaited.

I'm the baby of my family. I was an accident. I think I've shared that before. My parents already had three children, who were 10, 13 and 14. They were well-done with babies, just a few years away from sending the firstborn off to college and enjoying some time to travel.

But then: oops. Me.

I was an adored baby of older parents. I got away with things my siblings had never gotten away with. I'm grateful they never threw me in a pit and sold me into slavery.

I say that to be amusing, but really, jealousy can turn into a horrible, ugly thing. Into hate. Hate destroys. Our reading today says Joseph's brothers hated him.

I've been jealous, and it's not rational, and for me, it requires deep breathing and prayer. I don't get jealous of things like cars; I'm proud of my little economy car. That's a choice.

But I can relate to the various so-called "barren" woman in the Bible. In the past, I used to struggle when people got pregnant, because I was unable to. I've prayed my way through that, and I am legitimately joyful to be able to be a part of your children's lives. I'm grateful to be a Christian, and to make vows whenever we have a baptism which empowers me to be involved in the spiritual upbringing of your kids.

But my jealousy could have gone another way. I get annoyed when TV crime shows and movies feature childless woman kidnapping babies. It gives the rest of us a bad name. But that is an example of jealousy turning ugly.

Our jealousy about what other people have can destroy our souls. It can destroy your soul. Please don't let it. Don't let jealousy turn to hate.

I wrote this sermon on Thursday, before the horrific events in Charlottesville yesterday, just an hour away from us here. As I watched the news with my mouth hanging open, I realized that in this sermon I was reflecting on a personal level, and now need to point to the violent white supremacists yesterday. I don't know if their hatred is rooted in jealousy, but they have allowed their souls to be destroyed by hate. Hate can affect us as a group, leading to atrocities. Joseph's older brothers let their jealousy turn to hate.

Imagine what it was like for them. They all know that their mothers, their beloved mothers who raised them, fed them, held them, loved them beyond all imagining: their beautiful mothers were not Jacob's beloved. He produced children with them, but Jacob loved Rachel. Then, Jacob loved Rachel's son, Joseph, the son he and Rachel had dreamed about for years and years.

And then that son turned out to be a dreamer himself, someone who dreamed that his elder brothers would bow down to him.

It destroyed their souls. They planned murder. Now remember, today's not the end of the story. There will be redemption! But today, let's stay here.

Actually, let's move ahead a little. Next Sunday, we will hear about these brothers' reunion; but imagine what those in-between years were like. They sold their brother, then they lied to their father and told him Joseph was dead.

Now, Rachel was dead by this point. She died in Bethlehem, before they settled in the promised land. She died giving birth to Joseph's little brother Benjamin. So the brothers got rid of that dreamer Joseph, but Jacob still has one son of his beloved, one son of his old age, so the place of these jealous older brothers has not improved. But they have broken their father's heart, ruined his life, ruined Joseph's life, and they live with this lie for years and years and years, destroying their souls.

One helpful way to deal with jealousy is to empathize with the other person. Yes, Joseph was the favored one, and had dreams where others were paying him homage.

He also lost his mother. He was a motherless son. He may have been his father's favorite, but his father had to be a mother and father to him. Do you think his brothers thought about that? They knew their mothers were not the most loved, but the most-loved mother was dead, and Joseph had three stepmoms but no mother who loved him the way their mothers loved them.

I remember learning a poem in school that I bet many of you learned too: "Richard Cory." Edwin Arlington Robinson wrote the poem, which first came out in 1897.

The third verse is:

And he was rich - yes, richer than a king,
 And admirably schooled in every grace;
 In fine, we thought that he was everything
 To make us wish that we were in his place.

If you know this poem, then you know how it ends. Richard Corey takes his own life.

People in the town were jealous of him and wished they were in his place, because they did not know his pain.

Every person we are jealous of has pain that we don't know about. No one's life is perfect, even though many of us try to make it look that way on Facebook. Comparing ourselves to others is never helpful, especially if we are comparing our true selves to the self that they present to the world. Jealousy can ruin us.

Next Sunday, we will hear about redemption for Jacob's brothers, and about a new dream and new beginning for their family. In the mean time, I invite you to consider this Simone Weil quote:

“The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, ‘What are you going through?’”