

After the Sermon Hymn: *Stepping down to the congregation:*

Gen 37: 1-4. 12-28 **“The Power of Faith”** (08/07/2011)

- by Rev. Peter Dennebaum -

God’s peace with you!

Please pray with me:

Let the words of our mouths, and the meditation of our hearts be always acceptable in your sight, □ o God, our strength and our redeemer. □ Amen.

We will do now an experiment. Yes, again we will read again the text together. But while we will read everything together we will read this time the text from different perspectives.

In our text we will meet again Jacob, who fought last week at the river Jabbok with God and earned for this courage the name of honor “Israel”. So I ask the first pew here on the my left side to read the text from Jacob-Israel’s perspective and to argue later in our conversation from his perspective ... BE Jacob-Israel.

We have further on his favorite son Joseph, the youngest, and his 11 brothers, whose names we will this time NOT repeat again.

I ask the second pew on my left side to read the text from Joseph's perspective and to represent him later well in our conversation.

11 brothers against one – I think this should be also represented quantity wise among us; I ask the first 5 pews on my right side to read from their perspective and to represent their acting afterwards to the rest of us.

Two out of the 11 have an own part among the brothers. Ruben, the oldest son, and Judah, the fourth. May I ask the fourth pew on my right to represent later Ruben and the fifth pew Judah? Thank you!

And finally we have the traders, the buyers: The Ishmaelites, and Midianite [Mi-dianeit]. Could you, in the fourth and fifth pew on my left to represent later them? Thanks to you all.

And now let us read together from our pew bibles on page 34, from the book of Genesis, chapter 37, the verses 1-4 and then 12—28. Let us read together the story how his own brothers sold Joseph.

Joseph Dreams of Greatness

37

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob.

Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their

father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him. [...]

Joseph Is Sold by His Brothers

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, 'Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.' He answered, 'Here I am.' ¹⁴So he said to him, 'Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me.' So he sent him from the valley of Hebron.

He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, 'What are you seeking?' ¹⁶'I am seeking my brothers,' he said; 'tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock.' ¹⁷The man said, 'They have gone away, for I heard them say, "Let us go to Dothan."' So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, 'Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.' ²¹But when Reuben heard it, he delivered him out of their hands, saying, 'Let us not take his life.' ²²Reuben said to them, 'Shed no blood; throw him

into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him’—that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father. ²³ So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; ²⁴ and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it.

25 Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. ²⁶ Then Judah said to his brothers, ‘What profit is there if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? ²⁷ Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.’ And his brothers agreed. ²⁸ When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.”

.... Thank you!

I. What did you feel while reading?

- (1) 9 brothers (pew 3-5, right side)
- (2) Joseph (pew 2, left side)
- (3) Two brothers Ruben & Judah (pew 4 & 5, right side)
- (4) Father Jacob-Israel (pew 1, left side)
- (5) Ishmaelites & Midianite pew 4 & 5

II. Do you have any open questions? ... If not, I (!) have:

Ishmaelites and Midianite – do u have any idea, where you come come?

... Ishmaelites: You descent from Ishmael, and Ishmael was a son of Abraham. When his wife Sara was not able to give birth to a child she offered him her handmaiden Hagar. And Hagar bore Abraham Ishmael. Later Sarai was also able to give birth to another Abraham son: Isaak, who became later father of Esau & Jakob-Israel and therewith grandfather of Joseph. When Ishmael was 14yo Sarai became worried about Isaak and forced her husband to banish Ishmael, her step-son together with his mom Hagar, her handmaiden. Abraham released both from slavery and sent them forth. When both were close to die of thirst in the desert God saved them and promised them many descendents. Ishmael became the forefather of the Arabs, while the son of his half-brother Isaak, Jacob-Israel (pew 1, left), became the forefather of the Israel.

... Midianite: Nomads in today's Saudi-Arabia. Mose escaped from Egypt, where he had murdered a slave holder, to Midian. Here he married the daughter of the Midian priest Jitros. Here he met the first time JHWH in the burning thorn bush and got called to be the leader of the Israelites out of the slavery.

>> We are all related. Lakota: Mitakuye Oyasin. We are one big (world) family and asked to act as family by taking care of each other.

III. What do we do with this story?

It is now thousands of years later – is this now a historical story or how can God speak to us in this text for our situation here in Rockville Centre in 2011? ...

Last week I received two feedbacks to last Sunday's sermon:

1. (David) That you heard me liberal preaching. What you said therewith was that people might have tolerated this one time, but would hope that I would not bring politics into religion.
2. (Carol) That Dr. Jeremiah was controversial, when he preached 3 years ago in April 08 about Maleachi 3:6 and said this famous sentence "God Damn America". You told me therewith pretty much the same. That politics and religion would have nothing to do with each other.

Let me tell you today how I read the bible. And then decide yourself. But I want that you understand where I come from so that you can form your own opinion. Only through this kind of strong self-differentiation a dialogue can be possible.

I have another cultural background than most of you. I grew up in another society than this one and I got formed by a very political theologians.

But you have a very strong principle: Not to mix religion with politics. We need to talk about it. Or we will get into trouble. We need to learn more about each other. We need to get our theologies into a dialogue to each other. Already between yourself you probably have a diversity of approaches to God, faith and religion. We need to talk more with each other. I promise you to help you here.

I am probably the only German Intentional Interim Minister the UCC has. This gives us here in Rockville Centre a pretty unique opportunity for an exciting learning experience.

First: I don't care at all if you are a Liberal or a Republican. I am simply not interested in it. For the liberals I am too conservative when I speak as Christian out for the preservation of God's creation. And for the conservatives I am too liberal when I speak as Christian for the diversity of life styles and that God as love calls us not for exclusion, but in-clusion. So don't bother me what you vote for, but let us talk passionately about what we as Christians are called to do!

Second: Aristótle already described man as a zoon politicon, as a social human being. Aristotle described our human nature as focused on a good life as our inner natural purpose. To perfect our own natural purpose we human beings work instinctively for a state, in Greek "polis". The state as form of a social living together is, so Aristótle, planted in our human nature, as we can only here find a good life.

Third: This means - we ARE political beings. To take the political aspects of our human nature away from our religion means to deny our own nature. All stories of the bible are written in very concrete social, cultural, political contexts. God guides the Israelites out of a very concrete and very earthly slavery into a very earthly and concrete freedom. The prophets of the Hebrew Bible accuse kings for their godless unjust ruling; they accuse the own people to have forgotten to follow God alone, but got corrupted by gold and very earthly power.

I stand in this prophetic tradition. I accuse most theologians and ministers in this country to have made our Christian religion toothless. Instead of developing with their churches Christian criteria for a human polis, a human state, a human commonwealth they preach only to be nice and good people. They have privatized religion. They have pulled out the social tooth of our Hebrew-Christian faith tradition. Jesus died at the cross. Why? Because he was a just such a nice guy? Don't be not naive! He had to die because he questioned with his preaching AND doing the social and political order of his time. If somebody was political then Jesus! Because he took care about his human fellows. Because he loved them. As God does. And asks us for discipleship.

German theologians, ministers and churches failed tragically during

the Nazi regime. They collaborated with the powers of evil, betrayed Christ and God. Only a few had the faith to resist and to form the Confessing Church. Since then nothing is anymore the same. I grew up with a generation of theologians, who had experienced this failing and had learned painfully that systems can be sin and need to be fought -or reformed.

Bishop Desmond Tutu and his few fellows faced the same challenge during the Apartheid system in South Africa. Also here most ministers and churches had supported racism and justified racism with the bible. As the German Reichs Church had done to justify anti-semitism and also racism.

These examples show how Christians can fail with their understandings of the bible and the way they read it.

The theologians who taught me were very engaged in the anti-war-movements of the last decades, strongly pacifistic and engaged in the movement of the preservation of creation since the later 70ies. They demonstrated, got arrested, lived out their faith and developed and preserved this way a social welfare state, whose roots go way back into the late 18 hundreds, but provide today for a whole nation social accomplishments I wished everybody in this country would have also a right for: Free schools, affordable health care for everybody, many months of paid maternity leave or 6 weeks of vacations.

Continental Europe is like being on one of the many boats in the canals of Venice: When you get laid off you just grab the next bridge you pass and you are safe in the social net. Here you are like in our today's gospel reading with Jesus on the lake; and if you don't have faith or luck you sink; all burdens lie on yourself.

This is the paradox: The faith systems in Europe have brought with the welfare state social peace and security to Europe and its people. But the churches are empty and people seem to have lost their faith.

Here in the States I meet people with an admirable faith and ability to walk over water – because they have no other chance; the social-economical system requires it; or you sink and die.

It is up to you to decide which way you want to go. I cannot betray myself – I need to abide myself, my European value system and the way my theological teachers taught me.

Now, this is the way I read the sermon text of today, and how I (!) think God speaks today through this text: Joseph got treated like goods. As today so many people in this country get treated as goods – maximum valued after their labor value. And if they are not usable for profit, because of sickness, accident or age, they end up easily on the streets. God speaks to us in Joseph, who gets like Jesus sold for money. Not that money is bad by nature, but the order is wrong. A society, designed by active Christians, would turn the order around.

I am curious if you will be part of it, maybe in leading position. AMEN