

On Hate. And Fear. And Dreams. Oh, and the work.

A version of this sermon manuscript was preached by the Rev. Erin Counihan on Sunday, August 13, 2017 at Oak Hill Presbyterian Church in St. Louis.

Text: Genesis 37:1-28

(This is an expansion of the lectionary OT text for 19A. Our congregation has been reading the lectionary OT texts throughout this summer.)

At first I thought it was about hate.

They hated him.

It says so in the text and it gives us reasons why. They hated him. *He was daddy's favorite.*

Daddy loved him the most. Daddy gave him the fancy coat. He tattled to daddy on them. As someone who has 4 siblings let me just say, these totally appropriate and acceptable reasons for siblings to hate one another. Siblings are close and competitive and prone to jealousy and, well, it just happens. So, They hated him.

At first I thought it was about hate.

But then, they hated him even more, it says. They hated him even more when he had a dream and told them about it. In Joseph's time dreams weren't just these sleepy-weird-fantasy memories that we brushed off and said, "I really have to stop watching Law and Order before bed." No, in Joseph's time, dreams were visions from God, divine revelations, and holy proclamations.

Dreams weren't just ideas or dramatizations of our inner dialogues. They were prophetic truths send directly from God above. And so, when Joseph had a dream, when he was given a dream from God, that all his brothers were to bow down to him, that his brothers and even his parents were to bow down to him, and when Joseph TOLD his brothers who already hated him about this

dream of how they will bow down to him, they hated him even more.

They hated him even more because now they also had FEAR. Joseph's *words* had made them afraid. Joseph's *dream* had made them afraid. God's plan revealed in Joseph's dream had made them afraid.

This holy-special-divine-dream-plan terrified them. How could THEY bow to Joseph? They couldn't. Because they couldn't imagine bowing down to someone so lowly. Someone beneath them. The very one who was supposed to be behind them. Promises had been made, expectations set. This wasn't how it worked. It up-ended the power dynamics society had come to let them understand. Their baby brother, for he was the youngest at the time, wasn't the one who supposed to lead. It would be humiliating. The systems of their society determined that he did not have power, so who did he think he was? That kind of power was not his for the taking. That wasn't how it was done. He was to remain subservient to his more powerful brothers. That's how it worked.

But... if God suggested differently.... Because, God did have that kind of power.....

Well, that would change everything.

So when Joseph tells them of this dream, they who already hated him, were now also afraid, afraid of the change, of what it would mean for THEIR lives if this dream were true. Afraid that losing power, flipping the system as they know it, having to bow down to one who they felt was beneath them. That fear of the threat to their own position and influence and expectation is what drove their hate into rage. Murderous rage.

When I watched events playing out in Charlottesville this weekend, certainly I saw hate. But behind that hate, what motivates that hate to action, to rage, to a murderous rage, is fear.

Did you see the pictures? Did you see how young those white supremacists were? In their khakis and polos, carrying tiki-torches from Target and guns from Walmart. They were young. They weren't the old uncle toothless redneck hillbilly caricature we like to label as racist. The image we like to draw up because it is so different from us, fringe and outdated. No. Those people yesterday, they looked like us. They looked like me. They looked like young white men, terrified of a world that might not, just for a moment, put them first. They looked terrified of a world changing around them, of changes they cannot stop, of a growing voice of dreamers, who've been given a vision from God, that we are ALL equally created in God's image. That we in all of our various shades and styles, traditions and ethnicities, languages and tones, are beloved children of God. That is what they fear. As if there were a finite amount of God's belovedness....

“Here comes this dreamer”, Joseph's brothers said, “come now, let us kill him... and we shall see what becomes of his dreams.”

“They said to one another, ‘Behold, here cometh the dreamer... Let us slay him... And we shall see what will become of his dreams.’”

It's the inscription on a plaque outside room 306 at the Lorraine Motel in Memphis, TN where another dreamer once was gunned down.

“They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer, let us kill him... and we shall see what becomes of his dreams.’”

They’re not the exact words, but can’t you hear the chief priests and scribes murmuring that under their breath, behind waving palm branches as another dreamer rode into Jerusalem on a donkey?

“They said to one another, ‘Here comes this dreamer, let us kill him... and we shall see what becomes of his dreams.’”

It's a statement of hate.

It's a statement of fear.

It's a desperate plan.

And it's terrible theology.

Because if the dream is of God, if the dream is divine, then we can't really stop it.

Even if we plan to kill that dreamer.

Even if we hate the dreamer.

Even if we craft systems to keep the dreamer down.

Even if we silence the dreamer.

Even if we take away the dreamer's voting rights.

Even if we gerrymander the dreamer's voting district.

Even if we rob the dreamer of access to health care.

Even if we separate the dreamer from us in school.

Even if we refuse to educate the dreamer.

Even if we lock the dreamer up.

Even if we cast the dreamer out.

Even if we don't hate the dreamer, but we silently sit by and watch as our own brothers plot and craft and rob and silence and separate and lock up and hate and fear the dreamer.

Because, *and I'm so sorry to say it, Joseph*, it isn't about the dreamer.

It's about God's dream.

For ALL of us.

You'll remember, that this story doesn't end up quite the way that the brothers had planned. And it takes some years. Long, hard years, full of work, and relationship building, and more dreaming, and more work. But Joseph's dream, God's dream, does come true.

Church, I believe God has a dream for us too. A dream of beloved community, a peaceful kingdom, that time when justice rolls down like waters, where the wolf lies down with the lamb, where the multitudes are fed and no one is left hungry, where wisdom and understanding and love and hope prevail and sustain. It is the dream that God tells us over and over again in this message we call scripture. A dream that is taking thousands of years to learn and to live. A dream that requires us to join in what God is creating, to join in what God is making new, to join

in what God is bringing out in us, with our faith, our prayer, our witness, our confession, our commitment, and our work.

For if we want peace, we're going to have to work. If we want justice, we're going to have to work. If we want to end racism in this country, we're going to have to work. If we want to dismantle white supremacy, we're going to have to work. If we want to stop this violence, in our streets, in our systems, and in our own hearts, we're going to have to work. If we want to be freed from hate, we're going to have to work. If we want to overcome fear, we are going to have to work. If we want share and spread love, a love from God, a love that overcomes and overwhelms, a love that changes and creates and makes things new, a love that saves, a love that can and has and will topple systems and fears, a love that is already pouring through you and me and us, a love that is already present and acting in this world, we're going to have to work.

We've got to name it. Say it out loud.

Pray for it. Pray without ceasing.

Live it. And craft that dream into our own hearts.

And work for it. And work for it some more.

To join in the naming, praying, living, and working God is already dreaming for us.

Out of fear, they say, let's kill this dreamer.

Out of love, let us say, we will do the work to live God's dream.