

St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Muskego, Wisconsin
March 22, 2020

Undeclared by Dysfunction

- 1. Mourn the Dysfunction**
- 2. Celebrate the Dysfunction**

Genesis 37:1-11

We live in a time of dysfunction! Nothing is working like it is supposed to! Our society is not supposed to shut down like it has!

The dysfunction in our society is probably going to manifest itself in many of our homes. We are all under stress, worried about our health and the health of our loved ones, worried if we will have enough food if we go under lockdown, worried if our job will last. On top of that stress, families will suddenly be spending more time together, parents trying to become their children's teachers. For some, that will be great news. But for many, underlying dysfunction in the family will bubble to the surface as we begin to get on each other's nerves.

So I find it another one of those "God things" that last summer we chose the theme for today: **Undeclared by Dysfunction**. I still believe that is true. To defeat dysfunction, we first mourn the dysfunction and then celebrate the dysfunction.

Jacob's family was a model of dysfunction!

Jacob lived in the land where his father had stayed, the land of Canaan.

² *This is the account of Jacob's family line.*

Joseph, a young man of seventeen, was tending the flocks with his brothers, the sons of Bilhah and the sons of Zilpah, his father's wives, and he brought their father a bad report about them.

³ *Now Israel loved Joseph more than any of his other sons, because he had been born to him in his old age; and he made an ornate robe for him. ⁴ When his brothers saw that their father loved him more than any of them, they hated him and could not speak a kind word to him.*

⁵ *Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him all the more. ⁶ He said to them, "Listen to this dream I had: ⁷ We were binding sheaves of grain out in the field when suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright, while your sheaves gathered around mine and bowed down to it."*

⁸ *His brothers said to him, "Do you intend to reign over us? Will you actually rule us?" And they hated him all the more because of his dream and what he had said.*

⁹ *Then he had another dream, and he told it to his brothers. "Listen," he said, "I had another dream, and this time the sun and moon and eleven stars were bowing down to me."*

¹⁰ When he told his father as well as his brothers, his father rebuked him and said, “What is this dream you had? Will your mother and I and your brothers actually come and bow down to the ground before you?” ¹¹ His brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

This is only the beginning of the story. In the next section, Jacob sends out Joseph, his favorite son, his youngest son, to check up on his older brothers.

Talk about a recipe for disaster!

The brothers see him coming and plan to kill him. But then they decide to make a little money on him. They sell him into slavery. The chapter ends with this young man who once wore the ornate robe of an overseer, sold as a slave in Egypt.

Think of all that Joseph lost!

- His freedom of movement
- His family
- His status
- His wealth
- His future dreams

If I were Joseph, that last would be the hardest for me. How about you?

Dear sisters and brothers, don't be surprised if you are feeling down. You too have a lot to mourn because of the dysfunction of COVID-19! Like Joseph, we have lost:

- Our freedom of movement, forbidden to even gather here for worship.
- Our families. Some of you can't see your parents in facilities for the elderly. Others have lost your family of friends because we are afraid to get together.
- Our status – You may have lost your job. That isn't just income. For many of us, it is our role in society.
- Our wealth as we see the stock market crash.
- But perhaps worst of all, we see our future clouded.

Brothers and sisters, let us first of all mourn the pain this economic dysfunction brings. We have lost a lot! It is ok to mourn!

But there is more to mourn. Let's mourn our part in the dysfunction around us.

I'm not saying that we are causing the COVID-19 dysfunction in our society, but I am saying that all of us will react in some dysfunctional ways. In the Genesis 37 account we see that everyone had a part to play in the dysfunction of Jacob's family.

Jacob played favorites, loving Joseph more than his brothers.

Joseph received one dream and told his brothers. He could see they were angry! He received another dream. Did he wisely keep that dream to himself? No, he told it to his brothers. I can't see his face or hear the tone of his voice, but I have a hard time thinking that a 17 year-old little brother would be able keep a big smile off of his face. Did pride well up in his heart?

What was Joseph's brothers' part? They couldn't say a kind word to him and they hated him.

And then we go back to Jacob? What did dad do? Hey, Joseph, I want you to go be my eyes and ears and spy on your older brothers.

What a mess!

But what was God's part in all of this?

This is my great "ahha!" for the week. God is not mentioned at all in Genesis 37. Jacob's family is falling apart. Jacob sees it. But he fails as the Pastor of his Family to bring God into the family.

What are we going to do as we see the current dysfunction of our society seep into our families and our personal relationships?

Let's pause and ask: What is my part? Where have I lost my temper with my spouse, my children, my co-workers? Have I been short with them? Dismissive of their ideas? Have I been so preoccupied with my own issues that I failed to sincerely ask, "How you doing?" My answer to everyone of those questions is, "Yes!"

But don't let your answer stop at "Sorry!" Put on your "pastor" gown. A year and a half ago we had a message series called "The Family Church." (<http://stpaulmuskego.org/past-messages/family-church/>) We were reminded that we are all pastors in our family, called by God to provide spiritual care for our family, whether that be family by blood or family by friendship and personal interaction at work or school. That call to be a pastor hasn't ended just because we are in "social distancing" mode.

So what are you to do as pastor of your Family Church, as you put on your "pastor" robe?

Don't make the "Jacob" mistake. Don't let God be missing in the midst of your family dysfunction!

So what do you do first?

As a pastor of your family church, begin by confessing to God and then to those whom you have hurt that you have sinned. You might want to use these questions from the hymnal. If you download the written sermon from our website, you can use these questions over and over again.

*Have I loved God with all my heart, gladly heard his Word, and patiently endured affliction?
Have I been disobedient, proud, or unforgiving? Have I been selfish, lazy, envious, or
quarrelsome? Have I lied or deceived, taken something not mine, or given anyone a bad name?
Have I abused my body or permitted indecent thoughts to linger in my mind? Have I failed to
do what is right and good? (Christian Worship, page 156).*

Secondly, put your hands on the head of the Savior. Yesterday and today I was reading Numbers 28 and 29. It can be a pretty dry section: the daily offerings, the weekly offerings, the monthly offerings, and the offerings for all the festivals of the Old Testament religious year. But I noticed a phrase that is repeated for the monthly sacrifice and all the festivals: "One male goat is to be presented to the LORD as a sin offering."

Turn to Leviticus 4 in your Bibles to learn about sin offerings. A key part of that sin offering is that you lay your hand upon the head of the animal that is about to die, transferring your sin and guilt upon the animal.

Now compare that to Romans 8:3, “What the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering.”

Do you see it? I key part of your role as a pastor in your Family Church is to admit your part in the dysfunction (you don't need to be perfect to be a pastor!), confessing your sin and openly transferring that sin and guilt to the Savior who died for you.

And then invite others to follow you in this act of worship.

When we do that, then we can complete our defeat of dysfunction by celebrating!

I mentioned that God was missing in Genesis 37. Jacob's family left him out. But that doesn't mean that He was truly gone. He was still in control. That becomes evident as the story about Joseph continues in Genesis 39:

Now Joseph had been taken down to Egypt. Potiphar, an Egyptian who was one of Pharaoh's officials, the captain of the guard, bought him from the Ishmaelites who had taken him there. The LORD was with Joseph so that he prospered, and he lived in the house of his Egyptian master.

Please don't miss that! Disaster had come upon Joseph! Loss of freedom, family, finances! The LORD, the Savior God was still with him.

And as you read the rest of Joseph's story from Genesis 39 to the end of Genesis, you find out that the LORD was working in the midst of this family dysfunction not just to save Joseph, but to save his entire family from famine and death.

Our God is sovereign. He reigns over all things for the good of his church, and that includes the little churches that are located in your homes, as you gather in front of the computer and as you open your Bible. That was true at the time of Joseph. It is true now as well!

A number of my friends have helped me see how our Sovereign God is already at work in the dysfunction that COVID-19 has caused.

- We are taking Sabbath time. We have time to relax. And as you relax, spend time reading his word and keeping God in the midst of our daily lives.
- We have more family time. That is true for the nuclear families that are sheltering in place. But it is also true for many of you who are separated from loved ones. Now is the time to use the phone and Skype and all the other apps to reconnect. Think especially of those who are all alone. I heard how one American who lived through the lockdown in Wuhan appreciated just keeping the phone line open as she pattered around her apartment. She was alone, but someone was on the other end of the line, making small talk, assuring her that she really wasn't alone.
- We are seeing new ways to be servants. When dysfunction hit the disciples with James and John asking for first place and the other disciples angry about it, Jesus in our Gospel lesson (Matthew 20:17-28) called upon them be servants of all. We are greatest when we are servants. The disruption of our lives is giving us chances to be servants to those around us, sometimes in tangible ways, but often now online and over the phone.

- We are being prepared for greater service. Paul in 2 Corinthians 1 talks about how we who are comforted are in a better place to comfort others. This is a time of learning for all of us, a time when our lives and our lifestyles are changing. We will see life differently when this is all over. I don't know what the changes will be, but I am sure they will come. Know that the LORD God who was with Joseph in Egypt is also with us, and he will work through this COVID-19 crisis to prepare us for greater service.

It is hard for me to say it, but yes, let us celebrate this dysfunction. Somehow God is using this to bless his church.

One last thing: How long will this dysfunction last? Will we have Easter services? Will school start again this school year? Will we beat this coronavirus?

This is a picture of a church in Normandy, just a couple of miles from the Normandy D-Day beaches. I can't imagine the fear that the people of that area experienced on June 6, 1944. And what of the Black Death that people who entered this church experienced in mid 1300's when a third of all of Europe died? And what of countless unknown terrors in between those days and now?



But this is the stone above the entrance. To enter the church, you walk under Lamb who was slain. Remember that we are placing our hand upon this Lamb and transferring our guilt to him. He was slain for us.

And what is he lying on? The book of the future, with its seven seals. Jesus is worthy to break the seals and open the book. He knows the future. He knows how he will use the dysfunction in our

society and in our personal lives to bring about our story to a close in triumph: the final chapter of Revelation: We shall reign with Christ forever and ever (Revelation 22:5).

Let me close with the reading of Revelation 5 to encourage us that our God is sovereign and that our God is savior. May we always invite him into the dysfunction of our lives that we might celebrate his work in us and through us in the midst of our dysfunction:

Then I saw in the right hand of him who sat on the throne a scroll with writing on both sides and sealed with seven seals. ² And I saw a mighty angel proclaiming in a loud voice, “Who is worthy to break the seals and open the scroll?” ³ But no one in heaven or on earth or under the earth could open the scroll or even look inside it. ⁴ I wept and wept because no one was found who was worthy to open the scroll or look inside. ⁵ Then one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep! See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed. He is able to open the scroll and its seven seals.”

⁶ Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth. ⁷ He went and took the scroll from the right hand of him who sat on the throne. ⁸ And when he had taken it, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of God’s people. ⁹ And they sang a new song, saying:

“You are worthy to take the scroll
and to open its seals,
because you were slain,
and with your blood you purchased for God
persons from every tribe and language and people and nation.
¹⁰ You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to serve our God,
and they will reign on the earth.” Amen.

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My Next Steps to an Undefeated Life

- **Find Refreshment:** Read Psalm 42-43 over regularly. Let these words be the refrain in your heart instead of the negativity that can so easily creep into our hearts during this time of isolation.
- **Find the LORD:** The complete absence of God and the LORD’s name in the Genesis 37 reminds us that dysfunction breeds in the places where our Savior is not present. Make a commitment to begin reading the Bible daily. Join Our Journey to the Empty Tomb. Here is the link to the reading guide.

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Prayer of the Church

Father in heaven, how powerfully you have reminded us that we are not in control of our lives. Something as small as a virus stops our lives in so many ways. May this time of forced seclusion for many of us also be a time of personal introspection. How have I forgotten your Word and will for my life? What gifts from you have I taken for granted? How might you be drawing me closer to you, Lord, through this great disruption of our lives?

Father, we find great comfort in knowing that you care for each of us with an unchanging love. We place our health and the health of our loved ones into your hands. If it be your will, protect our lives. If it be your will that we suffer sickness and even death, grant us faith to know that through your Son we have the certainty of life forever where no sickness or death can strike. Father, we do believe this, but in this time of testing, increase our faith! (Luke 17:5,6)

Father, watch over and protect our doctors and nurses and all caregivers who are on the front lines of this pandemic. Keep them from harm. Give them wisdom and strength as they deal with the many who may be afflicted by COVID-19.

Father, we place our nation into your hands. There is so much fear and uncertainty. Many of us and others will face great financial hardships. Father, provide for our daily bread. Open our eyes to see the needs of others that we might respond in love as you enable us.

These and all our prayers we bring to you in Jesus' name, and in his name we pray:

Our Father in heaven...