

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

Joseph is having a bad week. Okay, his father, Jacob, loves him very much, and trusts him, but when he sends Joseph out to check-in with his brothers, he is sending him into an unintended catastrophe. Joseph is happy to go, of course, but first he doesn't find them where they are supposed to be, and when he does, they hatefully gang up on him and threaten to kill him. Only the by the consciences of Rueben and Judah does he survive, and even then he is thrown in an empty cistern and then sold as a slave to a passing caravan. Having heard all that and not perhaps not yet knowing the rest of the story, would you be surprised to learn that Joseph becomes the first real "hero" of the Bible? Frankly, at first glance, he doesn't seem the heroic type. He seems naïve and gullible. Notice that he doesn't scream or say anything when his brothers attack him. He doesn't even beg for mercy from down there in the pit while his brothers are sitting at the rim having dinner. Does he think they are playing a joke on him? Does he think that he is part of a Keep-Away game with his famous coat?

But Joseph has the ingredients of heroism. He is honest with his father when asked for farm reports, even though it gets him in trouble with the brothers. He has a sense of right and wrong and a clear conscience. He loves and admires his family. And he has a gift. In his dreamy visions he has the power of prediction which can be an advantage when preparing for the future. But he doesn't use his gift selfishly, but rather for the greatest good of all. All these attributes make him a sympathetic character to the readers of scripture, a person who, because of his authentic personality, seems to have every right to become a hero. His story takes 13 chapters in the Book of Genesis to tell, and is often thought of as a novella, with Joseph as the protagonist. You may have heard that heroes are born, not made, but our faith asserts that all are created with the opportunity for heroism, to use the gifts God has given to evolve into heroes and heroines. Remember that Jesus chose very ordinary people for his inner circle, and that they did, indeed, become heroes of the faith.

And, as it did with Jesus, our own heroic ministries begin with baptism. At the conclusion, or climax really, of the baptismal covenant, the candidates join the people in answering five questions. May I remind you what they are? "Will you continue in the apostle's teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?" "Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?" "Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?" "Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?" "Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?" The answer to each, according to the Book of Common Prayer, ought to be "I will, with God's help." Now, if you were baptized as an infant, a parent or godparent spoke your part for you, but in later years, you probably joined the rest of us in reaffirming those vows at least a couple of times each year. Baptism is a sacrament, that is, it is a sign that we each choose to align ourselves with God's love; we signal our willingness and joy to mesh our gears intentionally with the gears turning out God's own dream.

When we read these vows aloud from a printed text, they might, from time to time, just roll off our lips without much significance. But, for fact, the living of these vows is absolutely not 'business as usual'. Keeping these promises requires deliberate effort. Keeping the prayers is a promise to be intentional about recognizing God's presence. Resisting evil is a full-time job. Repenting means turning your ship around to head in a better direction, sometimes against the wind. Proclaiming, being an example, loving all your neighbors, striving for justice and peace and dignifying everyone is not for the faint-hearted. It's

for those who want to be heroes. Now, in hearing what I am about to say next, you might think that I am changing gears. But I assure you that I have every intention of keeping my sacramental gears efficaciously engaged with those of God. I would like to speak on the topic of systemic racism.

I recall first having heard that phrase, systemic racism, while I was in seminary, and wondering just what system was meant. Was it the justice system, the political system, the financial system, the theological system, the school system, the phone system, the digestive system? Just what system did people mean that had been infected by the virus of racism? I recall, too, then pondering the nature of systems, and it occurred to me that all systems, no matter how cleverly designed, had inherent vulnerabilities. All systems were suspect, for all were the result of compromise, which left them open to further compromise. They were regularly corrupted by insidious corruption or disruption by evils like racism. Think of any of those words with the Latin root “rupt”. Disrupt, interrupt, bankrupt, all have to do with the abrupt bursting of a system. A nefarious agent, like racism, can insert itself into a system which *seems* secure and efficient, a system which is even worshiped and adored, and then burst its trustworthy bubble.

If you have spent any time studying family systems theory, you will already know how vulnerable those systems are. And few people would claim that their own family system has worked perfectly and efficiently. Consider the archetypical families of the patriarchs about whom we have been reading lately. Think of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar. Think of Jacob and his twin brother Esau. Or consider the dysfunction of his marriages to the two jealous sisters. And consider today’s reading about the sibling rivalry among the brothers whose historical role it is to become the twelve tribes of Israel. Even such a lofty calling is endangered by interrupting evils. The threat to relationships, to our human family system, cannot be ignored. While we might find a well-informed mechanic to solve a problem with our automotive systems, or a well-trained physician who can discern an issue with our circulatory or nervous systems, inter-personal relationships defy most attempts at a cure. It is a tenet of pastoral care that we shouldn’t expect to be able to “fix” people and their attitudes. I’ve been told that racism, a blight which disrupts our human family, may be irretrievably tied into our individual DNA for one reason or another; that it may be so deeply embedded in our subconscious that we don’t even recognize its corruption. It may be resistant to any fix at all.

But before you, like Peter walking on the surface of the stormy sea, get that sinking feeling, consider this: God’s love is also an agent which can insert itself into the system of our human family relationships. Jesus calls to Peter who has been depending on the boat to be the system which will preserve him from the storm. Jesus is miraculously standing on the sea itself, and calls Peter to join him. “Come” he says, come without fear or doubt, come despite what seems like a foregone reality, come defy the storm and be a hero. And if it proves to be too much too soon, then I will reach out my hand and restore you. I am grace, I am unconditional love, and I have the power to save and inspire. You need not drown from that hopeless sinking feeling. Dear friends, even though we may not be able to “fix” ourselves and others, we can be heroic in our praying, in our repenting, in our striving, in our proclaiming, in our loving. Confronting sins like racism which infect our lives systemically is not business as usual. It is, rather a cleansing, a cleansing like that often associated with baptismal rituals. We may have to admit that we ourselves cannot calm the storm, but we can faithfully cleanse our hearts of evil, of sinful behaviors and attitudes. We have promised to do just that in our covenant with God, the one which we reaffirm with sacred vows. “Come” Christ calls to us, come and become a hero. Our response ought to be “I will, with God’s help!” Amen.