

Today we have two stories of 11 men who find themselves far from the safe harbor of home. For the disciples, the chaos of a storm strains their muscles as they row towards the shore, and the appearance of Jesus overwhelms them with fear. For the sons of Jacob, far from the eyes of their father and feeling freed from his authority, the appearance of the favored Joseph, raises up all their hidden hurts and jealousies and strains the bonds of brotherhood.

The Joseph story is easier to understand because some version of this story plays out in families in every city and town around the world. Jacob was a man who had two wives: one he desired and loved deeply and one was a mistake. At this point in the story, the man had 11 sons: 10 who were obedient servants of their father, and 1 whom the father loved above and beyond all the others. His name was Joseph, the only son of Rachel, the beloved wife.

And Joseph was proud of his favored status. He convinced himself that he deserved all the special gifts he had received – most especially that beautiful many colored coat with the long sleeves. He flaunted his status before his brothers secure in the knowledge that their father really did love him best. He was an arrogant, loud mouthed constant irritant to life.

Then one day, it all boils over. Pasturing their father's flocks far from his tent, enough of a distance to loosen the bonds of obedience and respect, enough of a distance to loosen their tongues to speak of their shared frustration and anger, enough of a distance for them to forget that brash young men eventually grow up, these brothers were just far enough away from Dad to hatch a plot. In the courage that comes from anonymity they spewed out their jealousy and envy.

Let's kill him. That's their plan. Let's get rid of the pest and we will never again have to listen to his bragging or feel his disrespect and our father's favoritism. In the end, no one could say exactly whose idea it was.

Afraid that his knuckle-head brothers would follow through with their own boasting, the oldest suggested they simply throw Joseph into a deep pit. It would buy some time for cooler heads to prevail.

Then they sat down to eat lunch.

While Joseph cries out from the bottom of the pit, they sat down to eat lunch.

20 years ago, on a brutally hot and humid night in Gettysburg, Elie Wiesel told us this story of Joseph and his brothers and that fateful lunch. Elie Wiesel was a holocaust survivor, a Nobel laureate, and a constant voice for justice. He spoke of indifference in words I'll never forget. He said,

“Indifference is the ability to sit down to eat a meal while your brother is crying out for his life.” Let me say that again

“Indifference is the ability to sit down to eat a meal while your brother is crying out for his life.”

It is easy to understand: indifference is the ability to pretend that all is well with the world so you can swallow the good food before you. It is our human ability to turn a blind eye and a deaf ear to another's pain. Having insulated ourselves with layer upon layer of explanations and excuses, placing ourselves at a distance: behind closed doors, or beyond the city limits or in the right neighborhood, we muffle the sounds of a brother's cry. We pay no attention because, in fact, we just don't care.

At the end of this scene, the brothers sell Joseph to a passing slave trader for 20 pieces of silver.

20 pieces of silver proved the price of their humanity, the profit to be made from the death of a brother.

I have struggled with the message to bring to you this day, not because this story of Joseph is too far fetched to believe but because it is so true..... and because it is so true, it is so sad. Sure, I can understand the brothers' frustration and jealousy, desire to rid themselves of an irritant, and I know how things can go so very wrong so very quickly.

But I cannot walk away from the truth that I too have sat in such counsels and kept silent. I too have convinced myself that I am too small a voice to make a difference. I too have chosen my comfort over speaking up for what is right and just. I know that in America, prisons are money making businesses and health care is rationed. When schooling is on-line, students without computers or internet are left behind.

And I have struggled to speak of God in this human drama. The Joseph saga stretches out over his entire lifetime, with glimpses of God here and there and we are asked to take the long view and see the hand of God bending the arc of history towards forgiveness and life and justice.

I think we prefer a Jesus who walks on water – who gives us a dramatic demonstration of divine power. Instead, we live lives like Joseph and his brothers – on the good days we act with mercy towards others. On the bad days, we sell our brother down the river for 20 pieces of silver – and try to pretend that God is too far off to notice. When we are struggling with just making it in this world, it is hard to remember who God has called me to be, and to believe that what I do or don't do makes any kind of difference.

And it's hard to trust. That God is in charge, that Jesus loves us, that we are forgiven, that how we live our lives matter. Compared to that, walking on water is easy.