

SERMON: 2017/08/13 - BTR

KIDS' TALK:

[Invite children up to the front. Walk out to the centre eating a snack. Drop the wrapper on the floor.]

What's your pet peeve?
Anyone?

[Wait for a reply.]

I hate people who drop their trash on the floor in public places. It really makes me mad. [Pause.]

Kids, do you know what a "hypocrite" is?
Let me tell you: it is someone who criticises others - says that they are bad; points out their mistakes - but whose own behaviour isn't much better.

So, they imagine that they're superior - and *that* delusion is very annoying for those around them.

In fact, "hypocrisy" was that thing that made Jesus so angry with the "Pharisees." [see, e.g.: Mt. 3:7]

They were very religious "types" who tried *really* hard to be holy - and that was a good thing, worthy of compliment [see: Mt. 5:20 - implicit]; but they were prideful too, and were quick to point an accusatory, condemnatory finger at those who didn't do the same.

And we must be careful not to make that mistake.

Let's pray: Dear God, keep us from being "hypocrites." Help us to see ourselves as you do: fallen; flawed; and lost without your grace in our lives. Amen.

[The children are dismissed.]

Jacob's son Joseph - Joseph with the 'dazzling coat of many colors' - is a fascinating character (in the Bible): [Pause]

On the one hand, Saint Paul, in *Hebrews* 11, verse 22, holds him up as a *model* of

religious faith for Christians to admire; and in *Acts 7*, Stephen, the first martyr, makes this huge speech to this mob, which was about to murder him, brutally, with stones, and a whole chunk of those “*last (dying) words*” are about how “wise” [v. 10] Joseph was, and virtuous.

And in non-Biblical Jewish literature - in what’s called the “Midrash,” the (early) “rabbis” greatly elaborated upon this tradition [gesture to the Bible/pew-sheet], speculating that when he was thrown into the pit (by his brothers), he was initially swarmed, violently, by the many snakes and scorpions that lived down there (in the damp darkness); but Joseph was able to *force* them back *into* their lairs simply by the power of his *prayers*. [See: n. 1] For many, he was the epitome of righteousness, and I’ve even heard Joseph being described ‘as a *prefiguration for Jesus...a flawless [example of discipleship]*’, [see: n. 2].

And certainly, today’s passage in *Genesis* implies that he was someone *very* special: where the text speaks of “dreaming,” this is a euphemism for a divine-endowed gift of supernatural fore-knowledge - Joseph, in other words, was prone to experiencing some kind of regular other-worldly ecstatic visions.

In fact, Josephus, the famous ancient, *Roman* historian, describes the patriarch as ‘a sacred scribe’ [see: n. 3], which is an interesting portrayal because this brings us back to what I was saying earlier about the Pharisees.

They were “scribes” too.

The New Testament *regularly* refers to them as such, and yet they were also *terrible* hypocrites.

And we see Joseph falling into that trap:

We hear how he would bring “bad reports” of his brothers to their father; that he enjoyed pointing out fault; correcting others; criticising them.

But we also learn from these verses [gesture to the Bible/pew-sheet] that he sometimes would avoid “mucking in” with his family’s business of shepherding, preferring to remain in the cool shade of the tent.

And this “double-standard” - of looking down on his siblings whilst not really “pulling his own weight” to support their tribe - leads directly to the catastrophe that befalls him.

And (blatant) hypocrisy will do the same for the Church: for you and me.

Like Joseph, as believers, *we* are the Heavenly Father’s favourite. That’s not to say He doesn’t love everyone: *He does(!)*. Scripture speaks so clearly about how the Creator values and cares for all creatures [Jn. 3:16], but just as clearly it also

explains how mankind has (without exception) earned his displeasure. Only those, therefore, explains Jesus, *who are obedient* will be, ultimately, truly 'blessed' [Lk. 11:28].

As Joseph was - that's the point about the special gift he received. His was that unique coat. Ours is life "abundant."

But being favoured made *him* smug - *and conceited*.

And the same can happen to us.

We can, if we're not careful, be perceived as *pharisaical*. As "holier than thou" "finger-pointers," indifferent and insensitive to the complex situations that can entrap anyone, actually, and lead them down morally-dubious paths and into making some pretty poor life-choices.

The question is: will we be inspired by the favour we've discovered through the cross of Christ to go out into the "fields" of this place, and come alongside those who are struggling? To roll-up our sleeves and do the unglamorous jobs - like looking after sheep. Or do we pretend we're above that sort of thing? And immune to the foibles of common-man?

No. Saints *know* that they are sinners.

This is the first step in becoming more like our Savior.

Embracing that fact of brokenness. Of weakness. And not hiding from it.

Amen.

Footnotes:

1. Ginzberg, Louis (1913), *The Legends of the Jews, Volume 2*, trans. by Henrietta Szold, Philadelphia, P. A.: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 13.
2. Levenson, Alan T. (2016), *Joseph: Portraits through the Ages*, University of Nebraska Press, xxv
3. Feldman, Louis H. (1998), *Josephus's Interpretation of the Bible*, Berkley, C. A.: University of California Press, 347.