

Nothing Personal...
Genesis 34
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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Have you seen the movie *You've Got Mail*? This 1998 hit stars Tom Hanks as the owner of a hugely impersonal book store who falls in love, unwittingly, with Meg Ryan, the proprietor of a neighborhood book shop that is eventually driven out of business by Hanks' firm. One of the themes that runs through that movie is a line that Hanks' character repeats over and over: "It's nothing personal – it's just business". And, if you've seen the movie, you know that that's true: Hanks' huge megastore is incredibly impersonal, the overpriced coffee chains are sterile, and the characters meet through the most impersonal of all means, an internet chat room. For Hanks' character, what matters is that the deal gets done, the business grows, and money is made. There is nothing personal.

I thought about that film when I read through Genesis 34. This is one of the most distasteful chapters in the entire book of Genesis – it's hard to read and, I think, it's hard to understand. I'd just as soon skip it, but that would hardly be faithful to our plan to preach through the book, would it? After I read and studied this chapter, I turned to my favorite commentator, Walter Brueggemann, who has this to say about Genesis 34: "This narrative will surely not be widely used in theological exposition..."¹, which is, so far as I can tell, professor-ese for "you're nuts if you try to preach on this passage."

Guilty as charged. Let's take a look.

The story opens with Jacob and his family having been settled in the land for some time. Last week we witnessed the reunion between Jacob and Esau and, more importantly, the return of the promise-bearer (Jacob) to the promised land (Canaan). God has promised Jacob (and Abraham and Isaac) many children, and Jacob's got twelve so far. He's promised them a land, and they're living there. And he's promised them that in them, all the nations of the earth would be blessed.

But there's trouble in paradise. Jacob's daughter Dinah goes out to socialize, and she is raped by the local ruler. This is tragic, painful, and ugly. Jacob finds out what happens, but he doesn't do anything. He does not consult the rest of the family. Why? Look at verse 5: he doesn't want to bother them while they're at work. This rape, it's a terrible thing, Dinah, but let's wait until the boys get home. Nothing personal, Dinah, but this will keep until quitting time.

It appears as though Shechem, the rapist, is harboring feelings for Dinah. He asks his father to intercede for him, and as you heard, Hamor tries to make lemonade out of a bad situation. He comes to Jacob and says, "Look, Jake, this rape, it's a tragic, messy thing. But the thing is, Jake, the kid's in love. How's about we make an honest woman of her...in fact, I see big things happening

¹ *Interpretation Commentary*, p. 279.

here. We could do a merger! These kids, heck, they're crazy with love, but what if we let them get married and then you and I could set up shop together? There's a lot of money to be made, you know. It's a little personal, but it's mostly business, Jake."

And then Jacob's sons show up and are indignant, to say the least. They talk about Dinah having been "defiled" – a word that essentially means that now she is disgraced. She is ritually unacceptable. She is ruined. And that, in turn, is a disgrace to them (check out verse 14). They become bent on revenge and punishment – as though the rape has happened to them, not their sister. "Oh, trust me, Shechem, it's personal. It is very personal."

But look at the way that they deal with the situation: they take circumcision, the sign of the covenant, wrap it in a lie, and use it as a means of vengeance. They tell Hamor and Shechem that in order to get a little business done, they'll have to get all the fellows over in Shechem to circumcise themselves. If that happens, Jacob's sons say, we'll be able to deal.

Remember what circumcision is: it's the physical marking that God instructs Abraham to make on each of his male descendants. It's the physical reminder that God is a God who makes and keeps promises; God is a God who calls, sends, delivers, and empowers his people. Circumcision was given to Abraham as a personal means of reminding him and all of his family that God was in charge.

And now these sons of Jacob take this sacred rite and profane it. "Look, God, it's nothing personal – it's only business. We've got to get these clowns, and circumcision seems like a fun and effective way to do it, given the crime."

So not only is *Dinah* "defiled", but the *mark of the covenant* is defiled as men use it in a way that bears no resemblance to its original intention. They schnooker greedy Hamor and his love-sick son into circumcising the whole town (these must have been some pretty persuasive men, is all I have to say about that!) and then, while everyone is still a little tender, they wipe out the men, capture and abuse the women and children, and steal what's worth stealing. At this point, it doesn't look like this is what God meant when he promised Jacob, "In your family, all the families of the earth will be blessed."

And the story ends with Jacob asking in a nervous voice, "Now what do you expect me to do? I've been a homeless refugee all my life. I finally come home and try to get along with the neighbors, and you go and kill them all. Now nobody is going to invite us to their block parties any more. We're in big trouble, boys. Thanks a lot."

I think that Brueggemann is right: this is a hard and ugly story. Where is the good news in this chapter? Nobody's hands are clean! Except for Dinah, everybody acts in bad faith or with no faith.

So here's what I wanted to do. I wanted to preach a real scorcher this morning. I had all kinds of notes asking the question, "how do we turn aside from the intentions of the covenant and use the practices of faith for our personal

goals?" I wanted to look at the ways that we mistreat other people for the sake of our own personal convenience or material gain.

And that would be easy, because I find myself doing that all the time. In the past week, I've had conversation with Season about the ways that our American factory farms mistreat animals, ruin the environment, and put many, many people at great risk...so that I can have cheap pork chops. I hate that. I've had conversation with Mollie about the ways that the world's foreign policy seems to be shaped by a particular twisting of religious ideology that seems to have more to do with hatred and oil and revenge than it has to do with sharing the love of the creator...I hate that. I've had conversation with folks about "back to school" shopping and the reality that it's just so tempting to go into the big box retailers and buy the cheapest clothes without wondering if they were made in sweatshops by nine year olds making 37 cents and hour. I hate that.

The problem is, as Adam Simcox has told me, is that I'm pretty good at preaching that kind of sermon. It's easy for me to get on my high horse and try to lay bare our cultural fascination with material prosperity, ease, and power. But if I were to preach that sermon on this text, I'd be doing the same thing. I'd be taking my religious power and wielding it like a club in such a way that at the end of the day, we'd all feel guilty and powerless and go home afraid to grill out or buy new skivvies for the school year. It's nothing personal, folks, I'm only preaching.

So I'm not able to do that – not this morning, anyway. What can we do with this sordid passage? Where do we see some good news? Where is hope and help and encouragement and empowerment?

What if we try to use our holy imagination to envision a different outcome to this story? What if we were able to come up with another ending? Let's assume the same tragic beginning. Jacob and his family have settled in a land that is promised to them, but owned by others at this point. As they enter the land, a beautiful young girl is abused. She is terribly and tragically hurt. What could happen?

What if we gave Dinah a voice in this story? In Genesis, she doesn't say a word. Everybody is talking about her, killing in her name, begging for her hand in marriage, but nobody actually lets her talk. What does Dinah want? What does Dinah need? What do you think would happen – what could happen, if we as individuals and if we as a congregation were able to somehow learn to listen to the people who have been taught that their voice does not matter? What might result if we learned how to simply wait with those who were scared to death? How can we encourage those who are petrified? How can we help people to walk through their own pain and dis-ease, rather than simply giving them a set of answers that makes sense to us? Our world...our city...heck, our neighborhood is full of Dinahs. It is full of people who have been conditioned to think of themselves as powerless and therefore they are mute. Can we hear this story from Genesis as a charge to listen to them and to walk with them?

And Dinah is not the only one who needs to find a voice in my re-write of this passage. Where is Jacob? Why is this man who has wrestled with God,

who has bested his brother, who has heard the promise – why is he all of a sudden mealy-mouthed and cowering in fear? And why is he still called Jacob – “grabber” or “trickster”? Wasn’t he re-named Israel – “God protects” or “God strives”? Speak up, Jacob. Take some leadership. Name the problem. Why are you deferring to your boys at this point? You are, so far as we know, the only one in the family who has dealt with God face to face. Why aren’t you dealing with him now? Why aren’t you leading your family to him now? Why are you standing by in silence as your sons disgrace the covenant and murder their neighbors? Oh, church, can we confess that too often we are afraid to raise our voice? Can we turn to God and give him the things that matter to us? Can we take those hard places to our neighbors – to our brothers and sisters in faith – and say, “Look, this doesn’t seem right to me, but I’m having a hard time seeing another possibility. Can you help me grow through this? Can you help me see God in this?” Please, Jacob, find a backbone.

And you, you sons of Jacob – for you are surely not the sons of *Israel* today - will you please take a moment and consider the covenant that you are defiling? Don’t you see that in asking your neighbors to circumcise themselves so that you can kill them more easily is directly opposed to the kinds of grace that God calls you to? What if we were to re-write the story so that these sons of *Israel* might respect the power of the covenant and, even moreso, might be a little terrified of the God with whom the covenant exists? These men are so anxious to be agents of God’s justice and wrath that they are not able to pause for a moment and consider that they, too, might be worthy objects of that judgment. Beloved, am I in this story at this point? Am I too hasty to deal with others in anger and bitterness, and maybe even hide behind some religious cloak when I do so? Oh, if I am, forgive me. And teach me not to do this. Teach me how to relate to you and to the world around me as a forgiven sinner, and not as an arrogant, self-righteous jerk.

So if I could re-write Genesis 34, I might make those changes – I might give Dinah a voice, help Jacob to find his spine, and put the brothers in a humble place. But even if I could do that, I’d still be left with a question at the end of the chapter – the question that Jacob and his sons were arguing about in verses 30 and 31. The question is this: how can I live as a faithful person in a place where people don’t respect or know faith and in fact are going to try to get over on me time and time again? A place where people get raped and ugly things happen?

You see, just as Jacob was afraid of his neighbors, I realize that the people around me think that much of the time I’m an idiot. I give away too much money. I let people take advantage of me. For pete’s sake, I worship a man who let himself be killed for something he didn’t even do.

I don’t want to expose myself or the people I love to risk, to terror, or to injury any more than Jacob wanted Dinah to be raped.

But living in God’s promises in a place where not everyone knows or believes those promises implies a certain amount of risk. How can I be faithful, knowing that some will interpret faithfulness as weakness?

At the end of the day, I think it comes down to this: I need to pray for the strength to be faithful. I need to pray for the ability to act justly – even when I have been treated unjustly. I need to walk with single-mindedness towards God's business. I need to take God's business, and make it personal. That's a risk I am willing...that's a risk that I **need** to take. Amen.