

August 10, 2008
What is Our Particular Guilt?
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Genesis 37:1-28

Jacob settled in the land where his father had lived as an alien, the land of Canaan. ²This is the story of the family of Jacob. Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock with his brothers; he was a helper to the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, his father's wives; and Joseph brought a bad report of them to their father. ³Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. ⁴But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.

⁵Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. ⁶He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. ⁷There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf." ⁸His brothers said to him, "Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?" So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. ⁹He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, "Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me." ¹⁰But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, "What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?" ¹¹So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

¹²Now his brothers went to pasture their father's flock near Shechem. ¹³And Israel said to Joseph, "Are not your brothers pasturing the flock at Shechem? Come, I will send you to them." He answered, "Here I am." ¹⁴So he said to him, "Go now, see if it is well with your brothers and with the flock; and bring word back to me." So he sent him from the valley of Hebron. He came to Shechem, ¹⁵and a man found him wandering in the fields; the man asked him, "What are you seeking?" ¹⁶"I am seeking my brothers," he said; "tell me, please, where they are pasturing the flock." ¹⁷The man said, "They have gone away, for I heard them say, 'Let us go to Dothan.'" So Joseph went after his brothers, and found them at Dothan. ¹⁸They saw him from a distance, and before he came near to them, they conspired to kill him. ¹⁹They said to one another, "Here comes this dreamer. ²⁰Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams." ²¹But when Reuben heard it,

he delivered him out of their hands, saying, “Let us not take his life.”
 22Reuben said to them, “Shed no blood; throw him into this pit here in the wilderness, but lay no hand on him” —that he might rescue him out of their hand and restore him to his father.

23So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; 24and they took him and threw him into a pit. The pit was empty; there was no water in it. 25Then they sat down to eat; and looking up they saw a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, with their camels carrying gum, balm, and resin, on their way to carry it down to Egypt. 26Then Judah said to his brothers, “What profit is it if we kill our brother and conceal his blood? 27Come, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, and not lay our hands on him, for he is our brother, our own flesh.” And his brothers agreed. 28When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

We shift out of the Jacob/Israel cycle of stories in the Bible to the story of Jacob’s son.

Jacob, remember had 12 sons, born to 4 different women.

Born to his first wife Leah were:

Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun

Born to Leah’s maid Zilpah were:

Gad and Asher.

Born to Rachel’s maid Bilhah were:

Dan and Naphtali.

Jacob was the favorite of his mother Rebecca and because of that it created all kinds of problems with his older brother Esau. So many that he had to flee for his life.

Jacob, unfortunately, did not learn the lesson that when parents play favorites that it creates problems — for Jacob clearly favored Rachel as his favorite wife and he favored the children she bore over his other 10

sons.

Rachel had two sons
Benjamin and
Joseph

You may not know much about Benjamin — the youngest son of Jacob and Rachel. He was born just outside of Bethlehem — and Rachel died in childbirth and her tomb is a Jewish shrine to this day

I bet that you know some things about Joseph — if not from the Biblical story – you probably are familiar with Joseph courtesy of Andrew Lloyd Weber and his musical: Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat.

Joseph was a dreamer

And his dreams often were about how he was going to be master over his older brothers.

Joseph given according to the KJV a multicolored coat by his father Jacob to show his favor.

We find Joseph this morning sitting in the bottom of a pit — about to be sold into slavery.

As the dreamer is sitting in that pit —> which brother do you think he is blaming for putting him into this mess?

The story continues with Joseph heading off to Egypt where somehow he ends up as a servant in the home of Potipher who is an official in Pharaoh's court.

Potipher's un-named wife takes a fancy for the hunky Joseph (think Donny Osmond?) and tries to get him to bed. Joseph refuses and she cries rape — and we find Joseph this time locked up in a jail cell.

And as Joseph cools his heels in the Egyptian slammer — which one of his brothers come to mind when he thinks of his predicament?

My guess — he is thinking about them all!

Anderson Tate was no poster boy for the Boy Scouts. In fact, he was an unemployed loser cokehead junkie without a clue, who had the misfortune of being pulled over for a moving violation in Fort Pierce,

Florida. But before the officers could get to his vehicle, he swallowed the evidence he was afraid they'd find: enough cocaine to kill him.

In fact it did. But not before his jailers and just about everyone else involved in this bizarre experience had a chance to help him. When his body was burning up, the guards ignored his pleas for help, and instead taunted him in a three-hour ordeal which was captured on the jailhouse video surveillance equipment.

"I don't want to die," he said. "I'm 300 degrees. I've got too much cocaine in my system." Employees and deputies walked past him, some laughed at him, some fanned his face with a clipboard to cool him off. Right.

When Tate went into convulsions and stopped breathing they took him to a hospital, where he died.

The undersheriff said that the deputies told investigators that they knew something wasn't right, but that everyone assumed someone else was taking charge.

Tate had a mother and a sister. Whom do you suppose they blame for his death?

"I think they should all be sent to prison for murder," said his sister, Ayanna (Associated Press, 1997).

Sixty three years ago yesterday, the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki were still smoldering from the withering, flesh-melting assault of two atomic bombs.

Who's to blame?

Who put Joseph in the well?

Who caused Anderson Tate's death?

Who is causing the planet to heat up?

Who is putting the hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica?

Who was responsible for apartheid in South Africa?

Who kept blacks in the back of the bus, and away from the lunch counters of

Woolworth's?

Who's responsible for the cutbacks in public education?

Who put Japanese-Americans in prison camps in our own country during World War II?

Who grabbed land and resources from Native Americans without so much as a thank you very much?

Who caused the property tax mess in lake county?

Who closed the State Street Center?

A powerful book can help us address the throat-gripping truth that there are some horrors in life in which we all share a measure of collective guilt. Called: Against the Third Reich , it reprints for the first time in English the wartime radio broadcasts in Nazi Germany of theologian Paul Tillich.

Paul Tillich is probably the most important and influential theologian to me.

But Tillich wasn't just an impressive theologian and author of numerous works including a three-volume systematic theology, and later professor at the University of Chicago, he was an outspoken critic of the Third Reich. He wrote more than 100 radio addresses, which were broadcast into Nazi Germany from March 1942 through May 1944. The broadcasts, through the Voice of America, were passionate and political pleas for Germans to recognize the horror of Hitler and to reject a morally and spiritually bankrupt government.

When you read these addresses, you can hear the German pastor rant against anti-Semitism and Nazism and offer keen observations on the liberation of Europe and the meaning of the Christian faith.

Sixty-five years ago Monday, Tillich delivered a broadcast on collective guilt. Listen to some of what he said:

"Hamburg, one of the proudest of German cities, is a heap of ruins. Ten thousand are buried in the ruins. A hundred thousand are without homes. Many people of the German nation will ask: Why our nation? Why have we become the victims and tools of the National Socialists in order to become the victims now of the rain of fire and of want and of death on the battlefields and of inevitable defeat?

"This is a question that is as old as humanity. At all times people whom a heavy misfortune has struck have put the question: Am I, then, more guilty than others? And many have answered: I am conscious of no guilt. Why then is it hitting me in particular? And others have answered: I am as guilty as all others, not more, not less. Why am I punished more than the others? And yet others have answered: Yes, I am especially guilty, because I could have better understood and was blinded and led into destruction.

"Countless people will swing to and fro among these three answers. The superficial ones will exonerate themselves of any complicity in the evil. The deeper ones will grasp that there is a collective guilt, and the finest and best in the nation will lay the greatest blame on themselves. They will say to themselves: If we had been stronger and braver and wiser we could have prevented the destroyers of the German nation from having won power over it.

"There is a collective guilt of humanity in every disaster that strikes humanity, in wartime as in peacetime. Only fools and hypocrites exclude themselves from this collective guilt, which is acknowledged by all sages and saints and prophets".

Why was it so hard for Joseph's brothers to acknowledge their collective guilt?

Why was it so difficult for America then and now to see its racism?

Why is it so hard for us to work together deal with global warming

Why is it so hard to car pool and take public transportation?

Why is it so easy to push the homeless out of our neighborhood and into someone else's?

Clarence Page, columnist for the Chicago Tribune, offers some insights. He argues that people are likely to say:

1. "It's all too darn complicated." Racism, global warming, public education, corrupt politicians -- who can understand all of this? What I can't understand, I can't be guilty of.
2. "It sounds like deja vu all over again." We've heard so many stories of disaster that it just all sounds the same. Autocrats and plutocrats are always crying wolf. So what? Tell me something I don't know.

3. "It's the system, not the people." And it's a complicated system. People are good, but we're dealing here with systems and traditions which are just too hard to unravel.

Joseph's brothers no doubt tossed around excuses like these as well as Tillich's three questions:

Am I alone guilty?

Am I as guilty as the others?

Am I innocent of any wrongdoing?

The church, too, must look at itself in the mirror.

What does the church say about our neglect of the poor rather than finding a collective will and strategy to help?

What does the church say about the ongoing battles over a woman's place which has everything to do with what men give up in the struggle.

What comment does the church make when foreign policy is driven by what's good for the United States?

How does the ChristBody feel when the boundaries of race, ethnicity, gender, class and nation become the larger arenas within which we determine to have it our way.

This is not a rant against personal responsibility.

It is a biblical call to recognize how broad personal responsibility is.

It is what Nehemiah had in mind when he, who had grown up in Babylon during the captivity of the Jews, declared that he was responsible for the acts that led his people there:

"I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses"
(Nehemiah 1:6-7).

It is what Isaiah discovered in the presence of God in the temple -- the reality that "unclean lips" was not merely his personal possession but public property -- not just his apartment number, but his area code: "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). It is what every prophet knows who sees herself or himself

as part of the predicament of the problematic people -- God's people:

- ◆ We may be saved but we are still selfish
- ◆ We may be a saints yet we are still sinners
- ◆ We are all called but we are still conflicted
- ◆ We may speak to God, but we often speak with forked tongues
- ◆ We have been called to freedom and yet still oppress others.

"What is our particular guilt?" Tillich asks.

We are guilty not so much in kind, perhaps, as in degree.

That's why Jesus says, if you murder in your heart, you're just as guilty before him.

That's why we review and confess our sins — our collective sins that bring collective pain and collective guilt, and call for collective repentance.

We are guilty as charged.

But is that the end of the story?

Thank goodness NO.

We have Jesus, who has shown us a way
a way of hope
a way of peace