

The garment in his hand. A sermon from a summer series on the life of Joseph, preached on July 9, 2017 at St. Giles' Presbyterian Church, Prince George, BC by Rev. Herb Hilder

Lessons; GENESIS 39:1-21

JAMES 1:12-16

Though the lesson read by Jessica about the Bible's first family is in the Bible,
 It is a story with the change of names could be found in any newspaper today,
 Tweeted about,
 Put on Facebook and be the subject of commentary by any new service "editorial panel"
 Can you see the headlines and hashtags?
 Wife of powerful figure accuses servant of rape!
 Pictures show her holding the servant's garment
 Servant is a foreigner – proving that ALL they want is our women echoes more than one letter from the public
 Servant now in jail under military guard
 It is a story about lust, betrayal, entrapment, revenge, abuse of power – a real mess!
 How so current

Now, there are some who might question in this 'awash in sexuality' world in which we live, Why do we have to spend worship/church time on such an unpleasant and steamy story?

The simple answer is if we are going to reflect and consider the Joseph story

And what his story says to us about God, about ourselves and our relationship to God, this story cannot be passed over

A more personal and heart felt answer is that even among God's people,

Let alone those who do not live with the truth that God is centre,

There are still too many incidents like the one described in Genesis 39 –

Too many incidents of abuse of power,

Too many incidents where sex is viewed as some sort of bargaining tool,

Too many incidents where the innocent and perhaps naïve are placed in compromising situations by entrapment

Too many rationalizations like “I have needs” “It was consensual” “Everyone is doing it, so what is the harm?”

As long as such situations as described in Genesis 39 or variations on the David, Bathsheba and Uriah ugliness of II Samuel 11-12 come to light And one such incident is too many –

I believe the church and the community of faith has a responsibility to say in crystal clear language – *such behavior and actions are unacceptable.*

They are not the way God means for any of us to live!

Our story teller is forthright and clear without being prurient or coarse.

By God's help and guidance,

Joseph finds himself not only in the house of Potiphar – a man who wields considerable worldly power under Egypt's Pharaoh

But also Joseph finds himself rising in responsibility and trust in Potiphar's eyes

There is though another reality of living in

Potiphar's house – the hungry eyes and lingering looks by Mrs. Potiphar

Could be problems!!

This is of course what happens – problems – big time!

Potiphar's dependence upon Joseph's skill increases,

Which means Joseph is around the house a lot.

He's close at hand and as far as Mrs. Potiphar is concerned he's 'available'.

Seems to happen a lot with people or their families who come to believe that the norms,

The boundaries do not apply or are meant for them!

Mrs. Potiphar is spurned by Joseph on many occasions

Maybe Mrs. Potiphar is one of those who become aroused when the object of their lust says "NO"

For such people No is often translated in their minds "yes" or I'm just playing hard to get."

Interesting to hear Joseph's reasons for refusal of Mrs. Potiphar's offer
 How could I Joseph **do such a wicked thing (betray his benefactor, Potiphar) AND sin against God.**
 Unlike the opening chapter of Joseph's story – chapter 37 – which we looked at last week, Chapter 39 mentions God's involvement many times in Joseph's life.

To say what he does is to see that Joseph is slowly maturing

Mrs. Potiphar is abusing power – pure and simple.

One day, which should have been like any other, Mrs, Potiphar orchestrates that no one will be in the house,

The Hebrew of what she says is much more blunt, aggressive and crude

Come to bed with me – is the Hebrew translation of the word shav-kah – Sex! Now! Or Down! Sex

It a word that conveys the same sort of command that you would with throwing a ball for a dog – Go! Fetch!

She was demanding sex

She is willing to risk everything because of her uncontrollable desire for Joseph!

Joseph does the only thing he can do
 Unless he wants to be further entwined in this drama – he flees, leaving his cloak in her hand!

Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned runs
the old saying

Here we see it played out in this Biblical drama

Mrs. Potiphar calls rape,

By a Hebrew no less!

Potiphar has to do something

People in Egypt are executed for much less serious
crimes

But Potiphar only orders Joseph to be imprisoned.

I wonder why

I wonder if Potiphar had reason to disbelieve his
wife

I wonder if she had given Potiphar such reason

That is in the realm of speculation,

But it is part of working on and reflecting upon the
text – I wonder questions and statements.

This week, 3 points to highlight – there are indeed
many more we could lift up and underline,

But we begin with three that make this story of
Joseph and the Potiphar's unsettlingly current

The reality of sexual temptation.

Some church folk are very uncomfortable when his
story or the David, Bathsheba and Uriah story are
read and commented upon in church sermons.

The 'oh my' is on their faces, even if they never
openly say the words.

Yet in our 'awash in sexuality' age the church
cannot be ostrich like – head in the sand
Or Pollyannish – we will not speak about this

Why?

*Because the scriptures are very clear and honest about
the human dilemma and frailty*

Therefore, we need to honest too by including even
those 'oh my' stories

The sexual drive we are told is one of the strongest
drives we are given by god.

But like all gifts and drives given by God,

The sexual drive can easily come adrift if not
anchored upon the person of Jesus Christ and the
Word of God.

Temptation is very real – only the most obtuse
among us refuse to admit this to be the case

And it is not a sin to be tempted

The devil and the powers of evil use temptation to
make us think we do not need God

Life is exclusively about my wants, my body, and
my needs

Temptation sometimes takes the form of
inappropriate sexual thoughts and compromising
situations.

Mrs. Potiphar's problem was not in admiring
Joseph

It was in letting her hungry eyes begin to dominate
her thought life

Temptation then is not the problem – what we do with it can be

Temptation always beings in our thoughts and our minds.

Further Mrs. Potiphar was very vulnerable – for worldly success and power with which she lived every day allowed her to begin to think she no longer had to abide by rules, boundaries and standards.

She saw herself as a free agent to speak

So, *mark – sexual temptation is real* – maybe even more so today than it would have been in Joseph’s time.

Succumbing to sexual temptation always leaves victims – there are no winners!

Look at the story in Genesis 39 – everyone loses

Potiphar loses a trusted and valued worker

--there may also be a breach of trust widening with his wife

Mrs. Potiphar – she does not get what she thinks she can just take

Joseph – an innocent in this – finds himself back in prison

Household servants – though not in the house when the deed happens – servants of any generation eventually find out all the family secrets – I wonder what they think of both Potiphar and the Mrs

Those who succumb to sexual temptation then *leave only victims and destruction.*

To think otherwise is to be thick, slow and stupid!

Over 30 years ago, the PCC drafted its first sexual abuse and harassment policy for church leaders and those in authority in congregations.

The church did this not because the clergy had a stronger sex drive than other professions, rather the Church recognized that leaders are in a position of power in congregations, Who often have within them a number of vulnerable people.

Until the mid '80's the habit of the national church and Presbyteries had been to remove ministers from situations in which there had been accusations or talk about inappropriate behavior The SAH policy was the first step toward recognizing that a) individuals needed to be confronted by the destructive consequences of their behavior

b) the vulnerable needed protection and help

As you may imagine, the policy had its critics – most of whom shouted – “what about unfounded and unproven accusations?”

Good point – and so the church asked for volunteers to do training in this area of SAH And lead area workshops in Presbyteries, Synods and congregations.

As one who began his ministry in a congregation where the previous 2 ministers had left owing to succumbing to sexual temptation, I saw firsthand the destruction left by their actions and the congregation's response.

Great tool for de-evangelism this is!!

And as one who believed that this is not just a woman's problem, with Katharine's agreement and support, I volunteered to become the trainer for Atlantic Canada.

I led workshops on the SAH policy and broken boundaries in all the Presbyteries in Atlantic Canada, a number of congregations, and 1 of the PCC's camps in the Synod.

When we came to Chilliwack – I was invited by the Camp Director at Camp Douglas to lead a pre-camping workshop on proper behavior between members of the staff and staff and campers and campers and campers

I always alternated between this morning's reading from Genesis 39 and the David, Bathsheba and Uriah story in II Samuel.

Were such workshops universally well received.

NO –many of my colleagues said – why are YOU doing this – this is a woman's issue

More than one said to me – I can withstand any temptation – I have the Lord on my side!!!

My reply was – read the scriptures again on the matter of sexual temptation.

The verb used is not “stand” – it is “flee”

“Herb you should know better – you are cheapening the reputation of all clergy and church leaders

Calling into question the integrity of such people!

They would never do such a thing!!”

Most never would or do, but I knew some who had....

Whenever I wondered why I was doing these workshops, I remembered the faces of those who came to me privately and said,

“Thank you for being so honest, yet gracious in speaking about the reality of sexual temptation.

Like Joseph I once found myself in a compromising situation I did not see coming.”

Or the person who said to me – you have given me great tools and suggestions about how to avoid situations of entrapment

Or, the person who said to me, “I wish I had not been so needy, but I also wish my minister had had more integrity – it has taken years for me to come back to church

Even now I still cannot tell anyone what happened Thank you for talking about God’s presence and forgiveness.”

Succumbing to sexual temptation will not bring long time pleasure or contentment – quite the opposite actually as the Joseph story clearly attests.

The final thing I want to highlight is that *God is a lavishly giving, forgiving, merciful and full of grace God.*

If we come to him in a true spirit of confession and repentance,

He does not hold forever over us – all our wrongs, or our mistakes, or our slides into action from temptation.

That does not mean there is no price to be paid for our actions – there is always a price to pay in succumbing to temptation – particularly sexual temptation.

For example, there may be financial reimbursement,

Trust must be rebuilt

A career or job may be lost forever

There is the matter of integrity lost

This is incredibly painful to the really contrite.

But the unquestionable truth remains that *God is always with us*

He will NEVER let us go

He was there when the hurts and the painful memories happened.

In fact, I think God weeps when we succumb to temptation of any sort.

But HE never abandons us – ever!!

In this world, know that sexual temptation is a reality with which each of us must deal: Know that to succumb to sexual temptation is destructive – nobody wins!

But know that as the Lord was with Joseph, He is with us in a real, abiding and in the palms of his hands way.

AMEN

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