

August 9, 2020 The Refinement of A Dream Genesis 37:1-28

Police checks have been a routine that the volunteer sector of our society has faced for some time. If you want to volunteer at an elementary school, lead a girl guide group, or even be a Sunday School teacher, one has to undergo a police check. We clergy are not excused from this routine. In fact we are required to renew our enhanced level police checks for working with a vulnerable sector regularly and make a declaration yearly of having a 'clean' record. I reacted with some dismay when I reapplied for another police check four years ago and was not immediately given the 'ok'. You see, it was a requirement then to have a new police check when you were beginning a new pastoral relationship. The response I received was cautionary. I needed to go get fingerprinted at the Halton Region Police headquarters. Why, I asked, this never happened before? "It is likely just a precaution sir, probably someone with the same first and last name, but a different address, has been in some sort of trouble with the law."

Aside from the inconvenience of travelling way out of my way to get this done, in a few days the results came back and the paperwork was ok'd once again. Such was not the case for two young adults featured in a news article this week, Josslyn Mouusey and Thairu Taban are pictured here with their human rights lawyer. The two began dream jobs with Metrolinx Ontario as transit safety officers. They both had grown up in disadvantaged neighbourhoods of Toronto. They had done the right things, took direction from their Black immigrant parents and worked hard at school and kept out of trouble. They landed these jobs with a future, with decent pay, with benefits and a promising pension plan. A few days in to the job however, they got rejection notices because of failed 'police checks' which their lawyer believes came about due to family tree ties with those who have a criminal record. It has been alleged that black people have a greater possibility of being rejected by this system of police checks even though they have no criminal record.

Is it too much to dream of a system where we can all be evaluated by the strength of our character and the talents we bring rather than the colour of our skin? We dreamers can have difficulty with the harsh realities of life. Joseph, one of the younger sons of Jacob was quite a dreamer.

Let me recap today's part of the story of Joseph. We arrive at the home of the family of Joseph in the hill country of Shechem. There are twelve sons in the family. Old Jacob is the patriarch. The matriarch's name is Leah. Jacob had married both Leah and her younger sister, Rachel early in their lives. Over the years Jacob and Leah have had ten sons. It was many years later that Rachel gave birth to Joseph. Soon afterwards she became pregnant again, and Benjamin, the youngest son, was born. Then Rachel died.

Rachel had been Jacob's first love. What we might expect to happen, happens. The two youngest sons, and especially Joseph, become the darlings of their father. Sibling resentments soon arise, but for awhile the father remains unaware. Joseph is given a particularly lovely coat, which creates even more jealousy. When the ten brothers go to work in the far reaches of the ranch, he stays home. Sometimes, Joseph reports to his father about his brothers' activities. They would say Joseph was a tattle-tale.

On more than one occasion Joseph has dreams in which he dominates the rest of the family. Jacob called Joseph out about that. But, all in all, the situation becomes ripe for disaster. His brothers came to hate him.

When we look at this tale in retrospect, we wonder how could Joseph be so arrogant to throw this up in the face of his family and not realize the likely consequences? But isn't that the way with dreamers. They often seem obsessed with their end goal and are oblivious to what is surrounding them. Perhaps Joseph thought this would all come together without much drama. But Joseph's dream took him to places he never counted on as a young man. The Psalmist has an interesting phrase for it—"until what he said came to pass, the word of the Lord kept testing him." (NRSV) Joseph's vision put him through a refining process that he would never have imagined. When he had the dream, perhaps he thought that he had the world by the tail. The reality was, things were going to be a lot more difficult.

Things come to a head when Joseph is sent to visit his brothers at work out in the field. Their dislike of him suddenly becomes focused, and they make a decision. They sell Joseph to one of the north-south caravans that work their way up and down from Egypt. Suddenly he went from being a favoured son of a wealthy man to being a slave with no rights, hauled off to Egypt, no family, no real home. Who wouldn't be in despair?

Now the brothers, wanting to cover their tracks, dipped Joseph's prized coat in the blood of a goat. The father is devastated when he learns that Joseph apparently has been killed. Jacob goes in to a very extended period of mourning. He could not be consoled by the other family members.

As the story continues Joseph proves most resilient. This is described as God being with Joseph and working for good in everything. His dream was still being worked out. Apparently, Joseph was so good at serving in the house of Potiphar that he quickly learned how to run the whole place and was elevated to head steward. The humiliating experience of being sold into slavery refined Joseph by preparing him with skills he would need later.

You may want to refresh your memory of this long story about Joseph. You can read it straight through in the following chapters of Genesis. Things were going well for Joseph in his servant work, until his master's wife accused him of trying to seduce her. As you can imagine, he was thrown in prison even though she was actually the one doing the seducing. God continued to be with Joseph, or as some versions put it, 'the word of the Lord' kept refining Joseph. In the prison of the day there was no right to an attorney, and no right to a speedy trial. Prison in the ancient world meant being thrown into the dungeon, where you may not even be able to stay alive. But with God's help Joseph managed to not only stay alive, but by using his gifts, rise up from his situation once again. While in prison he met other prisoners and Pharaoh's personal attendants and he began to interpret their dreams. This experience was a positive one and so when the Pharaoh needed an interpreter of his dreams the servant remembered about Joseph's gifts. Eventually Joseph was so helpful that he was rewarded with the position of Prime Minister of the most powerful nation of the world of that time.

It was a long and winding road for Joseph from being a young dreamer to becoming the chief administrator of Egypt. Why did Joseph have to go through such a long and painful process? Why did it take years of suffering to prepare him for "living" the dream he had in this youth? Why did the dream turn out to be different than he first envisioned it? Interesting, in the Joseph story, the dreams of others clarified the events which would unfold in Egypt and Joseph's role in all of that. I find it fascinating that Joseph had to go through all of those various life experiences in order to make sense of what God's role for him was.

Scripture seems to be suggesting that like Joseph, we may have to go through a refining process to get to the dream we have had. It may be that the dream holds real wisdom, but it may also have other dimensions we never imagined. In the Joseph story other people needed to ratify the dream before it became reality. God's timing may be different than our timing. It may be frustrating for us to continue to try to hold on to our dream, only to keep being disappointed with the way life actually works out. One of the lessons we learn when we're undergoing this refining process is that the first step toward "living" the dream is to surrender ourselves to God and get out of the way to let God's work happen.

I want to share with you this morning the dreams of a couple of people and how things are working out with their dreams. This takes us to the realm of religion and politics.

This week there was the death of a great man from Northern Ireland, John Hume. As the leader of the Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), John Hume helped create the climate that brought an end to violence in Northern Ireland. When the IRA called a ceasefire in August 1994, it was greeted with jubilation and relief across Northern Ireland. Despite enormous criticism, Hume always defended his decision to talk to Sinn Féin in order to build that peace process. While many people were involved, the SDLP leader's role was crucial.

"Politics," he once said, "is the alternative to war." John Hume's involvement in the cauldron of Northern Ireland politics began on the streets of his home city, Londonderry, where he was born in 1937. Post-war education reforms enabled him to win a scholarship to the local grammar school and he trained briefly for the priesthood, before returning to work as a teacher. Eventually John Hume entered the political realm.

Throughout that chapter of his life, John never lost the conviction that negotiations would in the end provide the solution and, he saw the 1998 Good Friday Agreement as proof of all he had argued for over the years. It was his crowning political moment; the agreement would not have happened without him. His contribution was recognised with the award of the Nobel Peace Prize which he received jointly with Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble.

Ray Davey was the founder and first community leader of Corrymeela, a 'thin place' on the north coastline of Ireland. During World War II he joined the YMCA to provide spiritual and physical support for troops. Ray was captured by the Germans and was a prisoner of war in Italy and later close to Dresden, Germany when it was bombed by the Allies. The bombing of Dresden affected Ray deeply, underscoring the futility and destructiveness of all conflict. While a prisoner, Ray thought (dreamed) about building community amidst conflict. After the war, Ray felt called to establish a centre in Ballycastle, his vision was to create an open village, where people of all faiths and backgrounds could come together and learn to live in community.

The current site was officially opened on Oct. 30 1965. 'Corrymeela' was already the name of the area when the community purchased the property. The meaning of the word 'Corrymeela' could be interpreted 'hill of harmony', 'hill of honeysuckle,' or 'lumpy crossroads.' It is a place where young people (and others) from different 'sides' are brought together to experience their common humanity and examine the effects of prejudice and propaganda. Face to Faith is an innovative schools programme for 12-17 year olds. It works to improve religious literacy, build bridges between young people of different faiths and backgrounds. Pupils are taught the skills and knowledge to resist extremist voices and religious prejudice.

The programme now teaches tens of thousands of students throughout the world, from Amman to Jakarta, from New Delhi to New York. This is done by training teachers and providing them with tools and resources to teach an understanding of the world's religions. But more than that, it is changing the way students learn about religion by exposing them to the very cultures and faiths they study. The programme brings together students from a wide variety of faith and belief perspectives, including those of secular world views and new belief systems alongside those of traditional religious belief from all over the globe through facilitated videoconferences.

Ray Davey died eight years ago. He and those who established Corrymeela in 1965 could likely never imagined the technology of the 21st century which would allow them to reach around the world with their message of hope and reconciliation.

How do we deal with anti-black racism? Can we learn from other transformations of society? John Hume began public life to campaign on issues such as housing and helped set up a credit union in his native city. But more traumatic times lay ahead. Despite a majority nationalist population, Derry's council was controlled by unionists - and its reform was among the key demands of the civil rights movement. Hume lived in the Bogside, scene of some of the earliest confrontations, and he witnessed at first hand the slide from peaceful protest to violent street confrontation. He confronted an Army officer and asked, "Are you proud of the way your men have treated these people?"

A black leader in the United Church, Adele Halliday, has said, "The work of racial justice is ours to do along with God. I need you to pray, preach, and protest----then repeat. I need our churches to offer a lifetime commitment to systemic change. Don't leave it for God only to do. When our dreams and God's dreams intersect, we are changed, we experience a softening of our hearts, we experience life renewed. Thanks be to God. Amen.