

Keeping Jealousy and Fear in Tack

Sermon by Walter G. Edmonds

Damascus United Methodist Church

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-36 and St. Matthew 14:22-33

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I have only sailed a few times in my life. Most of those times were in Mystic, Connecticut, during my seminary years when I served Union Baptist Church as the Director of Music. I loved sailing and was memorized by the ability of several friends to tack the course of the boat to get us to some place, turn us around, and then bring us back to shore. The sensitivity to the shifting of the wind in the sails and then the repositioning of the end of the boom of the studding sail to keep us moving forward seemed like an enigma, almost as if some inner spirit was directing the work of the sailor and he was just doing what he was being told. The zigzag patterning that emerged from these sequences of tacking have remained with me as a lesson about the work of God in us his children, as we sense and re-sense the shifting patterns that seem to make up our days, weeks and years.

Turning once again to the familiar story to many of us of Joseph's "coat of many colors" or as it has more recently been discovered from the Hebrew language, "coat with the full and fancy sleeves," I want to revisit the tacking concept in light of the narrative of this famous or infamous story. As read this morning Joseph was the late son of Israel or Jacob, the first son of his most favored wife, Rachel. (Jacob, you remembered had four wives, two of them slave girls and the other, Rachel's older sister Leah- funny we would be talking about this story after a week of listening to news about the FCLDS.) Whatever, because of this relationship of Jacob with Rachel, Joseph clearly was favored by his father and in many ways was lifted before his brothers as the "golden child" of the tribe, so to speak.

The piece of information about Joseph receiving a special garment, "technicoloredly" wild or "carefully sleeved," points to a focus for his brother's jealousy, anger and hate. None of us have trouble identifying with the brothers' feelings and desire to rid themselves of the lad. This is only heightened by two other pieces of information, one of them included in the reading and one not. In verse 2 of chapter 37, we hear that Joseph is being asked to assist his brothers who are the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah, in taking care of the flock, Joseph returns to his father with a bad report of his half brothers' shepherding. The Good Book says the brothers could not stand to even talk to him. That suggests severe lividness.

Secondly, we do not hear the stories about Joseph's two dreams regarding his brothers, also from chapter 37, but they are equally provoking. Perhaps you remember

them. In the first dream which he pompously related to his siblings, wisely or otherwise, Joseph sees himself binding sheaves in the field with his brothers, and his sheath, Joseph's sheath rises suddenly above the others, and all the others bow down to it. His brothers are quick to say, "So you want to be lord over us?" Joseph's comments are not given, but one can imagine the smile on his face as he glares at his brothers. And again, Joseph relays the dream of another night. "There were the sun, moon and eleven stars, and they were all bowing down to me," are his words. Even his father scolds the 17 year old, "A fine dream to have! Are all of us, myself, your mother, and your brothers to come down and bow to the ground you walk upon?" Joseph's words are missing, but he was either amazingly naïve or insensitively arrogant.

Now his brothers are sent to Shechem to care for Jacob's flocks. Again the father sends the favored son to check up on his brothers' shepherding skills. (One could question Jacob's reasoning at this point.) Nevertheless, Joseph is obedient, and in his pursuit of his father's request is sent to Dothan by a stranger overhearing his brothers' conversation about moving the flock. In verse 18, the drama begins. The brothers see the "boy in the coat" coming and their "blood boils," so to speak. Completely possessed by their anger and jealousy, their initial desire is to slay their brother and throw him into a storage pit, ridding themselves of the dreamer. Enter the Spirit of God in the heart of at least one brother, Reuben, the oldest son of Leah, and the tacking begins to change. Reuben, obviously understanding that killing his brother was wrong and against his father's will, begins a new tack. His words, "We must not take his life. We can throw him into the pit but not have his blood upon us." This they do after removing the symbolic coat. Then they sit down for a meal leaving their estranged brother with no food or water in the well. Traveling Ishmaelites are seen on the horizon and the Spirit of God enters Judah, the fourth son of Leah who was named "to praise Yahweh." The tack changes radically again. "What do we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? Come let us sell him to the Ishmaelites, then we shall not have laid hands on him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, and our own flesh." (*Jerusalem Bible*, p. 62) Well, the winds of the Spirit bring an even more curious tack. Genesis tells us that Midianite merchants came along the well traveled route and they saw the lonely Joseph in the storage well, lifted him out, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty shekels of silver. This part of the story closes with Reuben going back to the well, seeing nothing of his brother, tearing his clothes in upset, and returning to his brothers to contemplate what to tell Jacob or Israel.

The point I make is this: many, many times when we are grabbed by the Holy Spirit and saved from the brink of doing something extremely disastrous, the winds of the Spirit cause us to change gears, change direction, re-adjust our thinking and even our action. What we observe and learn from this story about jealousy is that it must be managed or readjusted by the winds of the Holy Spirit in our lives. It is not as though we

can eliminate or simply mitigate our contempt or jealous feelings about what others have or do, or have been given. No, what we must have is what these eleven brothers were given but not seen or even mentioned in the Biblical witness. These brothers, the sons of Jacob and his other three wives were given faith in Yahweh, the God who calls us to love His presence and practice His Law in our lives. That Law even in ancient times rebuked those who would murder out of jealousy or covetousness. That Law spoke to the heart of our ancestors to consider alternatives of the mind and heart to tack differently how to resolve struggles and difficulty. Even from the beginning our God and Creator was most interested in seeing that His Good would be preserved and that Yahweh's Will for Life would be upheld.

Mindful of that truth, that God through the Holy Spirit is always sending us new winds for tacking our thoughts and actions, I want to turn briefly to the Gospel story of St. Matthew 14. Here the disciples are left alone while Jesus takes time to pray and nurture his intimacy with *abba*, the loving eternal daddy who gave him the limitless ability to tack mysteriously from one moment to another. As we must realize our Lord knew where his strength came from and his ability to meet individuals and the multitudes he addressed and healed day after day. There was no way for tacking his way across the waters of life without knowing the rock or mountain upon which he stood. Yahweh, Elohim, El Shadai, Abba, gave him the powers for tacking life, and he throughout His ministry made that clear. Even some of the last words on the cross shout that truth. "Into your hands, O Father, I commend my spirit."

So, as the disciples grew fearful on the boat as the storm ebbed and flowed in that early morning, Jesus' walking on the water was yet one more witness to the heavenly tacking that was always given to our Lord by the *abba* Father. The disciples saw him as a ghost or fearful presence almost coming for their death. Not until he said, "Take heart, it is I, do not be afraid," could they be released from their fears and safety for their lives. Peter's request to walk to Jesus initially was in that same trust of "holy tacking" that God will provide; but Peter, like all of us became frightened and in his fear began to sink. When Jesus rescued him, Jesus simply said, "Why did you doubt?" Peter's response is not given. What is verbalized is that the disciples present all worshipped Jesus when he entered the boat. For my verbalization, I simply say, "They saw the mystery of His "holy tacking" from the One he called His *abba* Father, and they were both mystified and drawn into His holy presence."

Life is strange, and it's daily unfolding beyond our understanding. But yesterday as I was about to finish this preaching word for today, I heard the music of Judy Collins which my wife had put on the C D player for her pleasure. What I heard precisely as I reached the above last paragraph were the words from Leonard Cohen's favorite folk song, *Suzanne*. It happened to be the second stanza that begins, "And Jesus was a Sailor, and he walked upon the water." The closing words spoke to me in that unique moment.

*And you want to travel with him, and you want to travel blind,
And you think you'll maybe trust him,
For He's touched your perfect body with His mind.*

What is the need for tacking with the winds of the Holy Spirit? During times of fear and jealousy, times of loneliness and despair, times of transition and and resignation, the need remains as great as the darkness needs the Light of the morning. Amen.