

“In Darkness”

Genesis 37:12-36

Ephesians 5:8-15

In 2011, the grandfather of one of my closest friends died so I agreed to travel with him to the funeral. I’m not sure I ever met any of his family before that time, let alone his grandfather. Really, I just wanted to be there for my friend. On the day of the funeral, the room was full of people there to honor his memory – it was standing room only, if I remember correctly. His name was Harvey Gittler – known and loved in his community because he spoke up for people whose rights were being trampled on. He spoke up for police suspects and also for police officers and fire personnel. He helped even in small cases like a junior high school where only girls were required to buy gym uniforms. Harvey Gittler believed that civil liberties need to be protected and defended.

Many of you will remember back in 1977 when some Nazis wanted to march in the Chicago suburb of Skokie. Skokie had about 40,000 Jewish residents and about 5,000 – 6,000 Holocaust survivors so the town council denied their permit. The Nazis went to court in 1977 to seek the rights of freedom of assembly and freedom of speech and the ACLU represented them. Harvey Gittler, a Jewish man, believed so strongly in defending our civil liberties, that he worked with the ACLU during this time and continued supporting them for over 25 years even as many Jews abandoned the organization at that time for its support of this case.

Now, you may have a different perspective or position about the Skokie incident and that’s understandable. There are a lot of moral and ethical questions at stake here. But when someone holds to their values so strongly that they will defend them even when their worst enemies’ interests are at stake? That is integrity. Integrity means remembering that when something is right, it’s right whether it’s your worst enemy or your closest friend. And it also

means remembering that when something is wrong, it's wrong whether it's the one you hate the most or the one you love the most.

If there's one thing that's missing in our story with Joseph this morning, it is integrity. Joseph, for whatever reason, did not go out with his brothers to pasture the flock so his father sends him out to check on them. But this isn't a casual "why don't you go to the field next door to see how they're doing." Joseph's brothers were in Shechem, about 50 miles away. On foot, it would have taken Joseph at least 5 days to get there – only to discover from the surprisingly helpful random guy there that the brothers had moved on to Dothan, another 12 miles – at least another day's journey.

Joseph's been travelling about a week, but his brothers have been away from Joseph, away from Dad's influence for at least a week, if not two or more to keep pace with the flock. Were they basking in their temporary Joseph-free life? Were they spending that time griping and complaining to one another about how awful he was? Either way, as soon as they saw him, they started planning to kill him. And as they plan – they don't just want him dead, the word changes from just "kill" to something that includes the sense of ruthless violence. Put another way, they don't just want him to die – they want him to suffer before they throw him down into a pit. AND they prepare an alibi and an alternate suspect for the crime ahead of time. We'll tear his coat, dip it in blood, and say wild animals killed and ate him. It's dangerous out in the wilderness. Who wouldn't believe that story?

Now, you know that they know this is wrong or why would they lie? Why cover it up? Not only that, you know that they weren't all 100% on board with the idea because not one, but two brothers piped up. First Reuben, the oldest, tries to stop them. You would think that as the oldest of the brothers, he would have some weight to throw around, some influence on what they

would do and what they would think was right. And though you might say that he was speaking up, really, it seems more like he's trying to save face in front of everyone. He tells his brothers, "let's not kill him. We don't need to shed any blood to be free of him," while he thinks he can come back later in secret and run Joseph home to Dad. Reuben wasn't brave enough to stand up to his brothers – he wanted to appease them and go along with their worst instincts. Instead of murdering him outright, he seems to be suggesting that it's morally much better to leave him at the bottom of a pit (probably at least 6 feet deep, but it could have been up to 24 feet). This is a pit with no water in it in the desert where he'd be left for God knows how long. Then, Reuben could bring him to Dad because Dad always liked him best and then – lo and behold – no one is mad at Reuben at all! This isn't morality or integrity. This is like Reuben's doing political spin so that, no matter what, he looks good to the largest number of people.

But they all go along with this terrible plan. Not only do they go along with it, but as soon as it's done, as soon as they've gone far enough away that they can't hear Joseph's anguish and his pleas for mercy – you know what they do? They have lunch – like it's any other day of the week and everything is totally normal and fine. They said that a wild animal would devour Joseph and then they sat down to eat.

Over lunch, they see a caravan of traders – Ishmaelite, Midianite? It's a little unclear. In any case, they were going on down to Egypt when Judah gets an idea. He says "what profit will it be for us if we just kill our brother and conceal the crime?" He suggests they sell him to the Ishmaelites so that "we won't have to lay a hand on him then. He is, after all, our brother, our own flesh and blood." Let's not kill him. Let's not get our hands dirty. Why not make some money out of the deal? After all, he's family! Which motive do you think inspired him the most? That killing was wrong? That blood guilt would be on them? The desire for profit? Or the desire

to protect a brother – even a hated one? Was the last one his real reason, but Judah felt he had to hide his intentions to save face like Reuben? Or did he tack it on the end so that he could appear moral – to justify himself before all of them? They sold him for 20 pieces of silver – the standard price of a young, male slave – and off he went to Egypt.

Reuben returns and sees that Joseph isn't in the pit – not at all – and he tears his clothes in grief. He says “where do I turn?” “What do I do now? What am I supposed to tell Dad?” Reuben tried to appease everyone and now Joseph was gone – and all Reuben can think about is how much this will hurt their Dad. No one else seems to be thinking about him – perhaps not until they return to their father. Jacob recognizes the robe and immediately jumps to the conclusion that he's been torn to shreds by a wild animal. And his grief is powerful – he wails in agony, he puts on mourning clothing, and he refused to be comforted. Nothing could make him feel better. Could he blame these wild animals? Was it all his sons' fault for not protecting their brother? Maybe deep down he blamed himself for sending Joseph off in the first place. All his sons and his daughter and daughters-in-law went to his side, but he was inconsolable. He was so grief-stricken, he said he would still be mourning after his final breath.

All that misery, harm, and pain – and for what? The brothers knowingly chose darkness. They bent and distorted themselves so that darkness seemed like the best choice – the only choice. They compromised so many times that they couldn't even see that they were compromising any more. Ephesians urges us to, “live as children of light – for the fruit of the light is found in all that is good and right and true.” How can we tell if we are grasping at darkness? We look at its fruit. Does it bring about goodness and righteousness and real, sincere, straightforward, moral truth? In other words, does it pass the test of integrity to the virtues that

God has taught us from the beginning? Does it pass the test of being pleasing to the Lord or does it serve a darker purpose?

We are called to live in integrity and to expose what is wrong – to bring light to places of darkness. We aren't here to have fellowship with the darkness as though it is perfectly reasonable to bend what is right to whatever excuse is convenient at the moment. We have to be brave – to speak up and speak out when we see something wrong, no matter the cost. We do not believe that we are saved by how we live – that we can heap up praise for ourselves by being the best little saint on the planet. But we do believe that how we live matters because it shows people what we know about God – what Christ has taught us, how the Spirit is working in us. Paul tells us “Christ will shine on you. Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise.”

Examine your heart and your mind. Study the scriptures, pray, question, discuss. Discern what is pleasing to the Lord and then speak with the confidence of faith. Speak out where you see darkness creeping in and know that God blesses each act of integrity: whether it succeeds or seems to fail, whether it is easy or hard, whether it is popular or unpopular. Let us show up for each other and care for each other and speak out for each other. Let us walk in integrity every day, forever living in the light of Christ. Amen.

Links

<https://jewishcurrents.org/the-skokie-march-that-wasnt/>

https://www.cleveland.com/obituaries/2011/09/harvey_gittler_led_the_ohio_ac.html

<https://www.aclu.org/other/aclu-history-taking-stand-free-speech-skokie>

<https://www.acluohio.org/about/history/tributes/harvey-gittler>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Socialist_Party_of_America#Skokie_controversy

<https://newspaperarchive.com/elyra-chronicle-telegram-oct-17-1979-p-44/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/1977/06/26/archives/a-gym-suit-requirement-for-girls-successfully-challenged-as-biased.html>