

REFLECTION 13TH AUGUST 2023 “ARE ALL FAMILIES DYSFUNCTIONAL?”

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The questions that came up for me when I was reading this text from Genesis was “Is every family dysfunctional perhaps not all the time, but sometimes?” What is our role in contributing to that dysfunction? If any? Did our parents have favorites like Jacob had with Joseph at the expense of his other 11 sons? Can we blame any particular individual for our dysfunction?

The story of Joseph is a familiar story for many of us, it reminds us of the dangers of not treating all your children the same in Samoan we call this “alofa fa’apito”, selective love in English. Is this something we can or cannot relate to? Of course it is normal to love members of your family more or lesser than others or even to love each member differently, but to throw lavish gifts on only one whilst the others look on is confrontational and unfair and the case of these brothers, downright unjust. Is it possible that there have been times in our lives when we have been a little bit guilty of doing something similar?

Our reading from Genesis tells of Jacob and his family, and of how Jacob loved his son Joseph more than his other eleven sons. Joseph was the firstborn of his wife Rachel, for whom Jacob had labored fourteen years to marry. After the birth of Joseph and his brother Benjamin, Rachel died, and Joseph remained Jacob’s greatest remembrance of Rachel. So, Jacob spoiled Joseph.

Jacob's preference for Joseph undoubtedly manifested itself in many ways. The way that infuriated his brothers most was that Jacob gave Joseph a luxurious robe. It was a coat of many colors that privileged him above his brothers. Everyone could see it. As a result, scripture says that Joseph's brothers hated him and could not speak kindly to him. Hmm it would be understandable if all the siblings received a similar gift at the same significant time in their lives perhaps at their barmitzva or 21st birthday, it is understandable if it was part of the family tradition to spoil or treat someone special on their special day, but in Joseph's case this was not so.

When Joseph was sent by his father to check out how his brothers were doing in shepherding the family's flocks, Joseph's brothers found their chance to rid themselves of him. When Joseph arrived, his brothers captured him and stripped him of his robe. If not for the pleadings of Joseph's brothers Reuben and Judah, the other brothers would have killed Joseph then and there. They would have made an excuse for Joseph's murder by claiming that he had been killed and devoured by wild animals. Instead, the brothers sold Joseph into slavery to traders on their way to Egypt.

Was it for jealousy and hatred that Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, or was it due to the injustice they experienced from their father? One cannot help but feel some sympathy for Joseph's brothers for the obvious favoritism Jacob lavished on Joseph. Jacob did treat his children unjustly, and such injustice is hurtful and insulting.

From time to time, we are all challenged to look closely at how we live our lives and if we were to put our lives under a microscope how would we fair? When things go so right for us and everything we touch turns to gold we often equate it with walking on water, we can do no wrong.

Most of the things we do in life involve risk in the decisions we make. I know when I first started out in ministry and maybe even like all of us when we first start out and take that first step into the unknown it is literally like taking that first step of faith and we often think of it as a sink or swim situation. In my E News this week I highlighted a significant event in my life's journey that I thought had derailed me. Bear with me if you have already read this in E News, I don't think there is any harm in me repeating it again this morning.

Today, when I look back I can see very clearly the trajectory of my life having full meaning and purpose in every facet and that God had not abandoned me but was accompanying me through my life's journey.

Joseph's journey I believe was similar, there were many times when he was put into difficult situations and yet in every situation there was a purpose and meaning. God had intended for greatness to evolve out of what began as a dysfunctional family of brothers who did not know how to express their disappointment and jealousy of their father's "favorite child" and so instead of killing him they sold him to merchants on the road to Egypt. I suppose it was like "out of sight, out of mind". Instead of confronting our problems we choose to get rid of it in someways like sweeping things under the mat/carpet where we can't see them. Eventually, however, things do have a way of coming back to bite us when we least expect it.

I wonder if you see your purpose in life having been mapped out for you over your lifetime? That where doors were closed there was actually a good reason and purpose for that happening. I haven't shared this with anyone to date but it's probably the right time to do so now.

In 2016 when I was Pacific Regional Secretary for the Council for World Mission I was being reviewed for my second 4 year term at the Annual General Meeting of

CWM held on Jesu Island in South Korea. All the Pacific churches were present and had to vote first on whether they approved of me being extended for another term. The vote was unanimous that my contract be extended for another 4 years. So, when I went into my face to face meeting with the General Secretary for confirmation his eyes were to floor and he couldn't look at me. His first words were "I'm sorry we are not renewing your contract!". I nearly fell off my chair, I was absolutely dumbfounded knowing that the Pacific Churches had unanimously voted for me to continue in my role. Who, was he representing? Was he not listening to my constituency? What right did he have to overrule a region's decision? He then proceeded to suggest to me that it would be good for me to try and complete my Ph.D. Having not been prepared for this encounter I left the room and went up to my hotel room to pack my bags. I couldn't stop crying because I felt that I had let down the people of the Pacific. I understand when they heard the news at the Annual General Meeting they too were dumbfounded. I could only surmise that the reason I was not renewed was due to some personal issue with either the General Secretary or those who were part of the review panel. I was an outspoken person particularly on issues of injustice and I did challenge the General Secretary from time to time on issues of injustice and obviously he used this opportunity to usurp the decision of the Pacific churches with his own personal agenda.

I returned to NZ to attend my aunt's funeral and straight after I packed up the Auckland office of CWM and I returned to my doctoral studies full-time forthwith. This was 2016, I finally submitted my Ph. D thesis in November 2018 and in retrospect hand on heart, I knew I would not have completed it if I had stayed on at CWM for another 4 years. My Ph.D. was far more important to me than another 4 years of jetlag and globetrotting, I just could not see it at the time. I still remain

baffled as well as the Pacific region churches as to why the decision to not renew my contract was made. It may have been a man-made speed bump that I have yet to understand. But at the end of the day “yes” God’s trajectory was different to mine and I continue to be steered and guided along the way then and now and sometimes I have no idea where I am going.

In our Gospel reading, Peter dares to venture out of the boat when the rest of the disciples are just thankful to be clinging to it. How many of us would be willing to go that far? For most of us our failure is that we never leave the boat. According to Matthew, Peter actually does walk on the water a few steps, but then something goes wrong and he begins to sink. What happened? He took his eyes off Jesus. He must have started thinking either, “I can’t do this,” or, “look what I’m doing.” Either way, he loses focus and takes his eye off Jesus who is encouraging him, that he can do this.

What happens in the times in our lives when we lose our focus and we struggle to stay afloat? What do we do at these times? Even though I was deeply upset with what happened with my non-renewal of my role with CWM in the Pacific, I had to change my focus on what was more important to me at that time. My 86 year old mum at the time kept asking me and also my husband before he died too “when are you going to finish your Ph.D? Mum kept asking me because she wanted to be present and alive when I graduated. Thankfully she was there at the graduation parade in her wheelchair and she got to see me fulfil not just my goal, but the families goal. I did it for them.

Like Joseph, out of our dysfunction often something we least expect like Joseph saving the Israelite people from starvation or a Phoenix in the form of a Ph.D emerges from the ashes and we celebrate and give thanks. Amen.