

Sermon Series: Insights for Living from the Old Testament
Sermon III: "The In-Laws"

Text: Psalm 67; Exodus 18 – selected verses

The Reverend Joanna M. Adams
Morningside Presbyterian Church
Atlanta, GA

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*Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed down and kissed him;
each asked after the other's welfare...Exodus 18:7*

A pastor tells of going to visit a parishioner who had not been seen in church school or worship for a long time. As they talked, the inactive parishioner was curious. "How are they doing down at the church?" she asked the pastor. With that question, the pastor's sermon for the next Sunday came to her. She preached a sermon entitled "We Are They". (1)

Throughout history, the human race has tended to separate the we's from the they's, the insiders from the outsiders, the good people from the bad, our kind from that other kind. In 1997, I attended a world meeting of the Alliance of Reformed Churches and had the privilege of going to Eastern Europe, to the country of Romania, where I preached one Sunday in several churches in a city called Cluj. Actually, Cluj is the Romanian name; the Hungarians have another name for the city. The word has somewhere around 12 syllables, and I never could pronounce it. This is a part of Romania that once had been a part of Hungary until the post-World War I partition. The population is about half and half - half Hungarian and half Romanian, in this Transylvania region. Though I was there for several days, I never was able to see even the slightest difference between the two ethnic groups. It was impossible to tell a Romanian from a Hungarian, from my point of view. But they could tell. There is a tradition of animosity between the two peoples. About the only thing they agree on is that the gypsies are the lowest form of life on the planet. It would be hard to find a place where prejudice is so deep and has lasted so long. The Romany, as gypsies are called in Eastern Europe, are perhaps the most despised of all people on earth. The they's and the we's in Eastern Europe do not understand themselves to be as one.

Jesus said, "Let those who are without sin cast the first stone," so I want to take care not to sound superior. Certainly our own nation and our region has had its dark history with prejudice and with ethnic division. One could wonder about whether at least a part of the current attitude toward Latin American immigrants reflects a kind of categorical disdain.

As to our nation, oceans of newspaper ink and hundreds of thousands of Internet hours are being devoted this election season to all sorts of polarizing matters, not the least of which is the question of race. I recently asked a friend who lives in Chicago, how her parents were going to vote in the November election. Her parents are of Norwegian descent and live near the Canadian border in northern Michigan. She answered, "They will never vote for a black person."

"Are there any black people where they live?" I asked.

"Oh no," she said.

Last evening, I had a conversation with a second grade school teacher who told of watching three of her students walking together holding hands: one of Chinese descent, the second second-grader of African-American descent, and the other a regular old "waspy" white Atlanta kid. As they watched the three boys walk along, one of her fellow teachers said, "It's such a shame that in a few years, they are likely not to be friends."

Several Sundays ago Chris and I began a sermon series based on passages from the Old Testament, hopeful that we might be enlightened by these ancient narratives. Many of the stories told in the Hebrew Scriptures, most of them, in fact, describe the encounter of one nation, one family of people - Abraham and Sarah and their descendents - who, across two millennia, come to terms with their identity and with what their identity means in their relationship with other races and religions. Many different stories are told, each offering its own perspective. Sometimes, there is terrible enmity between the Israelites and their neighbors. Sometimes there is tolerance, but the overarching theme of the Hebrew Scriptures is not how the Hebrew people behave. The overarching theme is the nature of God, who as one preacher has recently said, "God is like a glue, binding people together beyond their divisions."

To state the obvious, we are born different from one another. Some of us are fair-skinned, some dark-skinned. Some in this world eat wheat, others rice. How boring it would be if everyone on earth were alike. It is the divisions among us that cause deep wounds and create hard lines of hatred. These hard lines of hatred never have been and never will be a part of the will of God. The chosen people were chosen, not to occupy a position of privilege and favor, but to be a blessing "to all the families of the earth". The prophet Micah offers a picture of a world that lives in the imagination of God, where the people of the earth have beaten their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, where the people can sit under their own fig trees and are free, to be themselves, without other people getting so upset about it. (2) People accuse peacemakers of being naïve, and to be sure, that is sometimes the case; yet, when I think of that line of the old John Lennon song: *You may say I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one...* I think of God as the other dreamer. God is the original peacemaker.

God's own son came among us to tear down the dividing walls that separate people, one from another. (3)

As the Republicans and the Democrats slug it out in preparation for the upcoming election, I pray that we citizens of America will not forget that our nation is the United States of America. In addition to our biblical text, I want to offer a contemporary text from the writings of Václav Havel, former President of the Republic of Czechoslovakia. He writes about the challenges societies face at this crucial time in the post modern era: "The way forward is not in the construction of universal systemic solutions to be applied from outside. The way forward is to get to the heart of reality through personal experience. Such an approach promotes an atmosphere of tolerance and solidarity, and unity in diversity based on mutual respect. I'm speaking here of genuine pluralism. In a word, human uniqueness, human action and the human spirit must be rehabilitated. The point is not to manage society; the point is to fundamentally change how we behave." (4)

These words of President Havel take us to the heart of the encounter between Moses and his father-in-law Jethro. We are several generations beyond Abraham and Sarah. You remember their son Isaac, who was the father of Jacob, who had sons, one of whom was Joseph, who was thrown into a pit by his brothers and taken to Egypt. During those years, God's promise to make of Abraham's offspring a blessing to all the families of the earth appeared to be in great peril. Yet, Joseph found favor with the Pharaoh and rose to power, ultimately saving his family in Canaan from famine. Later, "there arose over Egypt a Pharaoh who did not know Joseph." (5) The Hebrew people were enslaved. One of those slaves, a man named Moses, killed an Egyptian taskmaster and had to flee for his life. He fled to the land of Midian, where he met Zipporah, daughter of Jethro, with whom he had two sons. From Midian, God summoned Moses back Egypt to liberate the people from oppression. You know how the story goes - with the seven plagues, and the lambs' blood, and the dividing of the Red Sea and the skin-of-your-teeth escape, the forty years in the wilderness.

Today's story takes place in the wilderness, just prior to the arrival of the Hebrew people at Mount Sinai, where the commandments will be given. Here we have a father-in-law and a son-in-law, related not by blood, but only by marriage. They share only a brief history. They meet after years have passed and are glad to see one another. Moses leaves his tent, goes out and embraces Jethro. They ask after one another's welfare. They go inside, where Moses tells the story of the wondrous things the Lord has done. It is a happy, beautiful human scene.

Is it not true that some of the people that you are closest to by blood ties enrich your life very little, and some who most enrich your life the most are people to whom you are not kin? If you've ever said of another person, "I love her as if she were my own sister". "He is like a brother to me," then you know something of the friendship that existed between these two men. They didn't grow up in the same

region; they had not witnessed the same world events; they did not follow the same religion; they spoke different languages. But they cared for one another and wished one another well, and helped one another out when they could.

Jethro, a priest of another cult, shows respect for Moses' God and even offers a burnt offering to Moses' God. They break bread together at a joyful feast. The next day, Jethro gives Moses practical advice so he won't wear himself out as the leader of the people. When he observes Moses having to sit for long periods of time listening to and settling disputes among the people, Jethro urges him to handle only the hard cases and to appoint judges to deal with the rest. "Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. . . then he let his father-in-law depart, and he went off to his own country." (5)

I know it's a long way from this ancient story to Auden's poem "For the Time Being, A Christmas Oratorio", but I see a straight line from one desert setting to the other, as the Magi cross the desert coming to Bethlehem. One of the Magi gives this reason for the journey: "to discover how to be human is the reason we follow this star." Isn't that the quest? To discover how to be human, and how to be human, not only with our own little nuclear set, but with this diverse, often difficult family of human beings, to which God has joined us all.

I have been moved by the compassion of the rescue workers in Galveston, Texas, and other places from all over the country. The crews are there, helping people they have never met before dig out after the hurricane. They are teaching us how to be human now.

Who are our in-laws? People who were not our people in the sense of kinship or even religion, but people we need to help when they are in trouble, and who, we hope, will help us when we are. Today's story about Moses and Jethro, not the greatest story ever told, but it is a foreshadowing of the greatest story ever told. The summary of the plot of that story goes like this: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation." (7) Today's story reminds us that the church of Jesus Christ is a community called to live beyond categories, because we are heirs of Abraham, and because we look to Christ Jesus, who is "the way, the truth, and the life."

I close with something that happened at the Session meeting on Monday night here at Morningside Church. On the agenda toward the end of the evening was the endorsement of a mission trip undertaken by a member of this church. You could actually call her a child of this church. Miranda Brownlee has been raised here, is now grown, graduated from Emory University this May. She is in Colombia, the Latin American country, on a mission sponsored by our Presbyterian Peacemaking program. You won't believe what Miranda is doing. She is participating in what is called the "accompanier" program whereby community and church leaders in Colombia who have spoken out for the poor and for human rights have someone from this country accompany them, literally

go with them, everywhere they go. That way, they are less likely to be attacked or abducted by the death squads who oppose their work. Miranda Brownlee does not have an ounce of Colombian blood in her veins. She's had to learn another language in order to do what she feels called to do. She learned, right here in church, I think, that her family is not just her family, that "they are we." In this, we find our hope for the world.

(1) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 36, No.4, p.6.

(2) Micah 4:3-4.

(3) Ephesians 2:14.

(4) From a speech delivered at the World Economic Forum, Davos, Switzerland.

(5) Exodus 1:8.

(6) Exodus 18:24, 27.

(7) II Corinthians 5:18.