

Sermon Title: Not your typical Happily ever after Princess Story
Genesis 37: 1-4, 17-28
Acts 8: 26-30, 36-39

I come a Disney family. Coming from a family that lived in Florida for a couple of decades, including our family living in Orlando for six years in the 1980s has some effect. This influence extends to members brought into our family. My sister-in-law started the six-castle club, a group that has visited all six Disney theme parks. Some have even done it in a single year. The family “home” is being at Disney, such as the location for my parent’s 50th wedding anniversary in 2011.

My daughters were heavily into Disney princess stories growing up. You understand the basic plot of a beautiful princess that is either unknown or is put in a difficult situation and somehow the princess comes through at the end of the story and lives happily ever after. To be fair, Disney has done a lot of different plots with these narratives over the last couple of decades stretching these stories. And yet, these are stories about dreams and the journey trying to reach those dreams.

And yet, I expect that many of you are trying to figure out a connection between princess stories and the scriptures read this morning. Why is the story of Joseph being sold into slavery related to a princess story? Maybe I just got confused and preaching from the wrong texts. Actually, no, I do have the right texts and theme, but it will require going deeper into the scripture.

I will sometimes ask if you are with me. If you are not sure if you are with me, go ahead and say you are :-)

Lets try that for a moment....is everyone with me?

We heard the Joseph's story read this morning where Jacob, also known as Israel, gave Joseph a garment for his 17th birthday. The words in Hebrew for this garment are "ketho'neth passim". "Ketho'neth" is a word that always refers to an important or impressive garment typically worn by royalty or priests. So clearly this was a highly important garment.

The word "passim", particularly with "ketho'neth" is rather rare. In fact, these Hebrew words are used in only one other Chapter in scripture. 2 Samuel 13:18-19 uses "ketho'neth passim" to describe the garment of Hamar, the female daughter of the king, King David. The text specifically defined as the dress of the female daughter of the king, King David.

Is everyone with me?

The connection between the use of "ketho'neth passim" in the two stories has been known for a long time, and yet these words get translated in a number of creative ways to wash over some difficult truths for some cultures. Greek culture translated these words as a coat of many colors as an attempt to understand this language. Newer translations translate the garment as "a long robe with sleeves". One can hear the stress of the translators.

Is everyone with me?

Wait a minute. Jacob gave his child Joseph a beautiful princess dress for Joseph's 17th birthday. Jacob, the one who wrestled with God, the one who was renamed Israel, the one who was the father of the tribes of Israel, the grandson of Abraham who stepped out in faith to follow God to a promised land. That Jacob gave Joseph, his beloved child, a beautiful princess dress?

But lets just say it. Jacob gave his beloved child Joseph a Beautiful Princess Dress. And Joseph was so very happy.

Does anyone think this was a one-time thing Jacob did for Joseph? Likely it was a major gift that followed previous gifts. Joseph was likely overwhelmed by being his father's princess.

For those who are male-to-female transgender today, one can only imagine the euphoria at being given such a gift from their father.

Certainly they knew their father adored Jacob. And Joseph was difficult at times. And yet, the translation of a princess dress shows a far deeper issue. An issue of violence of those on the margins, of those who were different, of those who just did not fit with how things were done.

And his brothers were furious, furious enough to want to use violence to him, to kill him. They held back from killing him and just sold him into slavery where Joseph would experience more violence and marginalization. Joseph would have to do what was necessary to survive at this point. Transgender individuals particularly over the last 50+ years of visible history have had to do what was necessary to survive, from the Compton Riots in San Francisco in 1966 to starting the Stonewall riots in 1969, though so many individuals all over this country over the last 5 decades. And there are many who dealt with these issues for so many years before.

And yet, God redeemed Joseph's suffering, trauma and terror. The rest of the book of Genesis, the next 12 chapters mostly involve Joseph's story. You may remember that Joseph is a slave in Egypt and yet rises to become the head of his master's household. After a false accusation, he is put in prison for several years. And yet, he becomes a light in prison before eventually becoming the Pharaoh's primary individual in charge of food supplies and surviving a many year famine in the land. The people of Israel have enough. Joseph's family comes to Egypt, Joseph reconciles to his brothers, yes the same ones who sold Joseph into slavery, and the family arrives and prospers in Egypt. Joseph eventually has two sons, where each son leads two prominent tribes of Israel. Each son was personally adopted by his father Jacob, also known as Israel.

God wants to redeem the suffering, trauma, and terror of those who experience suffering today.

Joseph, the one whom God will save the entire family of Israel...

God did not simply tolerate Joseph. No. God made Joseph exactly who he was for exactly the time Joseph was needed. God's great plan for his people, Israel, went through Joseph. Without Joseph, Israel's story likely just dies in the famine. And yet, because of Joseph, the Israel's family settles and prospers in Egypt. God did not think that because of Joseph's gender bending that Joseph was disqualified from God's plan. Joseph was central to that plan.

And they lived happily ever after. Well, the story changes when Joseph is forgotten, but that is for another day.

God does not just tolerate you. You are celebrated. God made you and it is good. And God wants to work in your life as well. Each and every one of you. Just as you are, and where you are.

If Jewish tradition came through one like Joseph, we should not be surprised that such a tradition struggled and embraced different gender perspectives. For example, we hear a lot about Eunuchs, who would represent a range of genders in between male and female, experiences that our transgender friends would relate. In the OT book of Isaiah (56:4-5), we read

“To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths,
who choose what pleases me
and hold fast to my covenant—
⁵to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name
better than sons and daughters;
I will give them an everlasting name
that will endure forever.

God not only desires a relationship with the Eunuchs, but also will richly bless them more than one can imagine. Jesus affirms Eunuchs in Matthew (19:11), just after recalling the

Genesis creation story about “Creator made them male and female”. One of the early converts in the book of acts was an Ethiopian Eunuch, who traditionally started the Ethiopian church that is alive today.

God works powerfully through all individuals, including Transgendered individuals.

And for those of you who are in a different place and believe your story is outside of God’s consideration. Think again. God has you in the story.

God’s Kingdom is available to everyone (e.g. Acts 10). Anything is possible.

(Come down from the pulpit)

This story is an amazing story for those today that are in the transgendered community. God welcomes the transgendered community, and there are places in scripture that affirm the transgendered community. Truly good news.

And yet, the transgender community still struggles in this world.

On Wednesday will be yet another observance of Transgender Day of Remembrance. I have seen over a decade of TDOR observances. For all of the progress over the last two decades, we still have a long list. Certainly there is progress, and more gets reported, but it breaks my heart reading through each and every name. The community still has 40-45% of individuals attempt suicide. Two in every 4-5 people. The darkness can feel overwhelming, I know. Maybe someone in this room has been there before. And if you are in that place, this community enthusiastically is here to help.

And although we observe those who passed, we celebrate the struggle and life of so many transgendered individuals who have brought hope and light into this world.

The Ethiopian Eunuch asks Phillip, “Look here is water. What is to keep me from being Baptized?” Maybe you have been excluded like our friend, this Eunuch. And yet, from a transgendered perspective, his question is a test. Will I be excluded in this movement of God? Will there be boundaries? Am I not fully accepted in this community? Anyone who has walked this path would expect nothing else.

Imagine his joy when he said there is nothing that separates you from baptism. Nothing. Nothing at all.

You can hear the Eunuch say: Wait, you know I’m transgendered. And from Phillip the response is let’s go. Here is water.

To some, it sounds like a fairytale ending.

And know, for each and every one of you that you are in a place where you are riotlessly celebrated and there are no barriers because of how God made you.

God calls you to be your authentic self. I believe God calls all of us out to be our authentic selves as children of God that God made us to be. Move towards authenticity and just see how God transforms things around you.

We will celebrate communion together, and know that everyone is welcome at this table.

Everyone.

Everyone.

Each and every one of you.

What is to keep me from being at the table? Nothing. Come.

And know God says Welcome Home to each and everyone.