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Text: Genesis 34 (Selected Verses)
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Cycles of Violence, Seeds of Regeneration

In 1984, Phyllis Trible, a scholar of the Hebrew Bible, published a landmark book called *Texts of Terror,* in which she grapples with stories like the one we just read. Scattered throughout the Bible, we encounter acts of horrifying violence, often directed at women. When left unacknowledged or unread, people of faith fail to be honest about the book we deem "sacred." When the stories are read, if they are treated without care or sensitivity, we risk legitimizing that terror, precisely because it takes place within a book we deem "holy." In spite of that, or perhaps because of it, Trible insisted on reading those texts as a way of desacralizing them, to deal honestly with the terror the Bible does, at times, contain. But she's also teasing out an ethic, hoping to interrupt the cycle of violence those texts represent. When read critically and cautiously, the texts of terror may even have something important to offer us as we struggle to make sense of the world as it is.

It's with that spirit in mind that I have selected our text for this morning. Let's be forthright: it's a nasty and brutish story. When our Bible study group encountered it several weeks ago, I proposed that we skip it. The will of the group, however, was to read the story closely, to see what we might discern there. I'm glad we did. As we talked, the story came to feel contemporary, and I could sense two very different eras drawing near, the ancient Near East, and the world as we experience it in 2024.

Because I didn't wish to upset or trigger anyone, I left out the earliest verses of Genesis 34, which report what seems to be a sexual assault by Shechem against Dinah, a daughter of Jacob. I say "seems" because the text isn't entirely clear whether the violation in question was against Dinah herself, or against the patriarchal norms then surrounding sexual activity. Read from a certain angle, it might be that Shechem and Dinah were star crossed lovers in the tradition of Romeo and Juliet. It may well have been that in a moment of passion they consummated their attraction to one another, thus failing to uphold the strict legal and familial codes surrounding courtship. In other words, it may be that the crime here, if such it is, was that the young lovers failed to obey the norms of patriarchy, which required a long process of ritual diplomacy between the two extended families to secure the relationship. The absence of such diplomacy precipitated a war between those families. But of course, we can't answer those questions, because the text never tells us what Dinah thought or felt. Among the layers of terror embedded in this story is that Dinah herself is never given a voice. She is merely an object of exchange between two bitterly feuding ancient tribes.

I'll come back to Dinah in a moment. The erasure of her voice feels stunningly relevant to our world today. For now, I want us to focus on the brothers, Levi and Simeon, who become the shock troops for enforcing the patriarchal norms around them. The text tells us that they murder all the inhabitants of the city where Shechem dwells. As important as the action itself might be, it hinges upon an unspoken code that might be even more important, a code of honor and dishonor, of pride and of shame, of respect and of humiliation. It's tempting, and utterly wrong, to think that Levi and Simeon represent behaviors that have afflicted some times and places within the world, but one that we who are modern have thankfully overcome. Unfortunately, Levi and Simeon are alive and well, and we are seeing their dynamic all around us. For as often as not, those who enact forms of violence are doing so because, somewhere along the way, they have undergone some form of humiliation or shame. And the pattern, the tendency, seems to be that violence serves not so much

as a form of revenge, though it may be that, but as a twisted mechanism for the restoration of the agency, but also the honor that they feel has been stolen from them.

To name one example, Levi and Simeon stand for nearly every school shooter I have ever read about, who have almost always undergone some form of humiliation as a prelude to their violence. They stand for the codes of behavior that structure gangs and cartels. But in a way, they even stand for the ordinary reactions that you or I might have when we feel slighted or shamed. For my own part, I can say in my life that it is when I have experienced embarrassment or shame that I have sensed my own deepest anger welling up inside of me. Even the flash of anger we feel when someone cuts us off in traffic stems, I think, from some primal feeling of being disrespected, and thus dishonored. I don't want to push the analogy too far, but in small and sometimes larger flashes of recognition, we can see traces of Levi and Simeon around and within us, nursing some private sense of aggrievement.

But Simeon and Levi aren't simply limited to the personal realm. The dynamic that we see unfolding in Genesis 34 has implications for what plays out internationally between nations, in regional and global conflicts. And so, unpleasant though it is, I want our gaze to remain on those two brothers for just a little longer, for they can help us to see what is happening around us right now.

I've recently been reading about Germany in the Weimar era, after the first World War and before the establishment of the Third Reich - from 1918-1933. It was a creatively fertile era for the arts and sciences, but politically and socially, it was chaotic. Germany suffered disastrous losses in the First World War, and the Versailles Treaty, which dictated the terms of peace, was harshly punitive for Germany, especially economically. Enormous fines were imposed that left millions of Germans impoverished. Whether by design or not, the conditions of the Versailles Treaty led to what one scholar has called the politics of humiliation, which helped create the conditions for the rise of the far right in Germany. I do not believe it is an exaggeration to say that in Weimar Germany, the same toxic stew that afflicted Simeon and Levi was boiling: humiliation, shame, and later, a rage directed at enemies imagined and real.

By contrast, at the end of WWII, the Allies learned from the mistakes of the Versailles Treaty. Instead of imposing the politics of humiliation upon Germany and Japan, there was a concerted effort to reintegrate those countries into a newly established order. Instead of imposing punitive debts, for example, or gloating over their victory, Allied powers helped Western Europe to reconstruct itself through the Marshall Plan, while offering similar support for Asia, and most especially Japan. That foresight has had long lasting significance, forging partnerships that continue to flourish even today among peoples that once fought as bitter enemies. It was an instance in which the ghosts of Simeon and Levi were ignored, in favor of policies that sought to upbuild rather than to inflict shame.

It's worth observing that in both of the major conflicts that are currently destabilizing the planet right now - Russia and Ukraine, on one hand, and Israel and Palestine on the other - there has been a reversion to the politics of Simeon and Levi, a reversion to the policies of humiliation and its aftershocks. At the end of the Cold War, for example, Russia was subjected to a kind of economic shock doctrine that left much of its population reeling, while the victors in that struggle indulged in boasts and self-congratulation for having vanquished a bitter foe. That combination has now helped to produce an effect similar to what occurred in Weimar, Germany: a retrenchment of the most reactionary forces in Russia who have unleashed terror upon Ukraine - in effect, a twisted attempt to restore a lost honor. Simeon and Levi, it turns out, are alive and well in that part of the world. But they're alive and well in the Middle East too. Israel is operating from its own experience of humiliation, well known to us all, and the effects are catastrophic. But Palestinians too have suffered from decades of degradation, which of course has produced its own lethal response.

And they're here in the U.S. as well, Simeon and Levi. So far as I can tell, the people who are most susceptible to the far right politics now threatening to undo us are those who have experienced the humiliations of poverty, job loss, or addiction. But they're also those who perceive themselves to be losing status as privileged or elite. Those most susceptible to the siren call of the far right, which has by now been normalized, and which now passes for mainstream in our country, are those who either have suffered, or fear to suffer, some crippling form of humiliation that revokes their standing in the world. We too are burdened by the ghosts of Simeon and Levi.

The world is now desperate for a different kind of voice. And it is here that we must turn to Dinah herself. It is Dinah who stands for the mothers of Gaza, weeping for their children. It is Dinah who stands for the child pulled from the rubble of Lebanon. It is Dinah who stands for the men and women of Ukraine who never imagined a brutal invasion, and it is Dinah who stands for the Russian mothers whose sons have been killed in a war they neither understand nor support. In a way, Dinah stands for all the voiceless ones who are swept up in conflicts they neither wished for nor control. And in a still more pointed way, Dinah stands for each and every one of us whose fate is tied to the politics of humiliation. Like Dinah, ordinary people become voiceless objects in a world governed by the policies of shame. Were she to speak to us, were her voice to well up from inside of us, what would she say?

Perhaps hers would sound like the voices of some courageous women in Mexico I've recently been learning about, exhausted, fed up and enraged by the staggeringly high numbers of assaults against women in that country. Perhaps, when faced with the indifference of public officials, Dinah would blow a handful of pink glitter onto their heads, as one woman in Mexico City did to a feckless politician, who had said that the system was doing all it possibly could. It was an act which gave a name to an entire movement in Mexico - the Glitter Revolution. Perhaps her voice would be like those of the Muslim communities I have visited recently, who are voicing their anguish, imploring the world to stop the slaughter in Gaza, and to quit treating Muslims as so many nameless and faceless statistics to be murdered. Perhaps her voice would sound weary and scared, like those women lacking reproductive care in many parts of the United States.

Or perhaps she would tell us that it's true, in the chapter in which her story appears, she was not given a voice. But neither, she might point out, was God given a voice in that story. In fact, God was never even mentioned, implying that these cycles of honor and dishonor, pride and humiliation extinguish the very possibility of God. Maybe she would point out that that erasure, of her voice but also of God's, implies the erasure of the very possibility of mercy, the possibility of compassion, the possibility of beauty and forgiveness and care. Might it be that her voice, Dinah's, and God's, both of them suppressed, both of them ignored, are similar? Might it be that they are in some instances identical? Might both silenced voices represent a whispered and elusive force stirring within the Bible, but stirring also in every human soul, inviting those who can, those who will, into a different pattern of being?

Dinah's voice would be the one in which mercy, rather than honor, is learned as the highest form of value, and where the enhancement of dignity of the other is regarded as the highest virtue. And in those places where shame and humiliation do reside within our souls, it is Dinah's voice that would speak to us lovingly, tenderly, so that it no longer felt necessary to yield to the worst tendencies that humiliation can produce.

But I imagine Dinah offering a further revelation too. Is it not somehow Dinah's voice that speaks through Jesus of Nazareth? Did Jesus not show the world what it means to break the cycle of humiliation and violence? Think of the dishonor that Jesus suffered in his last days. Think of the betrayals, and all the many humiliations. In some alternate version of the resurrection, we could imagine him fulfilling the role of Simeon and Levi, restoring the honor that had been taken from him and taken from God, vanquishing his betrayers once and for all. But that's not what happens. He

goes and finds them in the places they are hiding, and as one who has undergone humiliation, he speaks into the places where they too feel shame. And he dissolves it somehow. Jesus initiates them into a way of being that we're still trying to enact, all these years later. Somehow, I imagine Dinah as a figure who is finally given voice in Jesus the Christ, and I imagine her telling us, and telling the world: there is a way beyond the politics of humiliation. It is a politics of restoration. It is an ethic of regeneration and hope, one that exists as a kind of green pasture, a meadow, one just beyond the shadow of death in which we so often choose to walk. Find me, Dinah says. Listen, if you can, to my voice, Jesus says, and I'll show you how to find it. I'll take you there.

It's a grim story recounted in Genesis 34. And yet somehow, it is our story. And I wonder: whose voices shall we listen to in our world? Those of Simeon and Levi? Or perhaps those of all the Dinahs who are speaking now, who are crying to be heard. Listen. Can you hear them?