

NYYM Bible Study

Wednesday July 22, 2015

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Conflict, Shadow and Unity

Wrestling with the Shadow

Genesis 32:22-33

We begin this morning with a bit more exploration of “shadow,” because it can be a bit difficult to understand. As I mentioned yesterday – I have a hard time getting a handle on this – *shadowy* – concept.

A couple of stories might help. First, a bit of shadow that I bring to our Quaker community. I love football. I love the Green Bay Packers – for those of you who might not be up on your football lore, the Packers are the awesomest team ever.

I am aware of how my passion for football totally does not fit with Quaker faith and practice. If there is such a thing as a Quaker sport, it is maybe baseball, or, I don't know, soccer. Certainly not football. And there have been some recent things happening in the world of football that have made the sport more uncomfortable for me. And still, I watch those games every weekend in the fall and winter.

I didn't always admit to this so readily among Quakers. I preferred to keep it hidden – in the shadows. But enough folks in meeting knew that on a Sunday afternoon, my husband Mark and I would be watching a game or two. So more than once after worship, someone might sidle up to us and ask if they could come over and watch a game with us. We weren't the only shadowed fans of football among Friends!

Another part of my story has to do with me having the very basic, very human need for connection. For many, many years, I denied that need in myself, and was fiercely, compulsively independent. I did not want anyone to know that I needed them. I did not want anyone to see my needs, or worse, my neediness. I did not for anything admit those needs or neediness to myself or anyone else. Of course, that being part of my shadow, it leaked out. I think it showed itself in my hyper defensiveness. I got angry pretty quickly, and I was quick to feel hurt by real and perceived slights. Oh, and here I am, talking in the past tense about this! Well, around certain people and in certain situations, where I feel especially vulnerable and unsure of myself, this is all very much present tense. My shadow is well and accounted for, when I feel vulnerable. I notice it when I feel like I need to defend myself and my opinions and beliefs. I am on guard, ready to fight or flee at the first word that feels like it might be adversarial.

I am grateful that by grace (and – therapy!) I have been able to bring at least some of my shadow into the light and love of God and friends. I believe that by seeing and knowing my dependence and interdependence, that piece of my shadow is maybe becoming more integrated within me. What that means is that a lot of the time I am okay when my vulnerability shows. I think it is what has

allowed me to bring to you in this Bible study a lot of my unformed thoughts about shadow within us and within our faith community.

When we can welcome into the room the parts of us that we think are unacceptable and ugly – our jealousy, maybe, or our disappointment, or fear, or our lack of desire to give up, say, eating meat – when we can bring that into the room and acknowledge it, then we have a chance at taking the shadow and learning from it. By that I mean bringing *all* of it – so for me, I might acknowledge not just my lack of desire, but my feelings of defiance around not wanting to be totally vegetarian; and my feelings of helplessness around all the negative consequences of eating meat; and maybe my despair at not being as good a person as I want to be. And – get this one – looking at all of that *gently*, with *kindness*, as God looks at it. And with an open and teachable heart.

We don't need to try and lock our shadow parts in a box somewhere and toss away the key. As if that ever works anyway. Because that is the thing about shadows. They may seem hidden – and we so often don't see them in ourselves – but they make themselves known. Often, other people can see them pretty clearly.

Now let's look at our Bible passage for today. It's the story of Jacob and Esau. The story starts with Isaac – the beloved child of Sarah and Abraham's old age – and Rebekah, his wife. Rebekah gives birth to twins – babies who struggled so much *even in the womb* that Rebekah wonders what the heck is going on. She turns to God – and finds out that it's not just two babies – it is two nations. Here's what God says: One nation will be mightier, and the older child will serve the younger one.

When they are born, Esau is first, Jacob is second. As a young man, Jacob first wrests the birthright from Esau. And then, with his mother Rebekah's help, Jacob gets his father's blessing, which was intended for the eldest, for Esau. After that happens, Jacob has to get outta Dodge because of the fear that Esau will kill him. In this story, it could be said that both children need and seek their parents' and their culture's approval – and it is in that need that much of our shadow lies.

But let's go on, as Jacob creates a new life in the land of his mother's family. After many years, God tells Jacob to return to his homeland – and to Esau. Jacob sends word to Esau that he is coming, and Esau sets out with 400 people to meet Jacob. Which scares the you-know-what out of Jacob. So he prays to God and prepares gifts for Esau.

We will read the passage beginning just before Jacob is to meet Esau.

Read:

Genesis 32:22-32

What a story! And what a great depiction and integration of shadow, conflict and unity. Because after this shadow encounter, where Jacob finally gets the one and true blessing from the one and true God, does he re-unite – happily – with his brother. But only after getting a new name – Israel – and a limp as a reminder of his wrestling match with God.

What do you see in this story about shadow, and how God works in the shadows?

And how does that relate to the conflict and the unity in the story?

Does this reveal anything to you about shadow, conflict and unity within community?

As you go through your day, notice who is in the shadows of your life and the life of your community. What does God reveal to you about them?