

**Rev. Claire Feingold Thoryn**  
**“Siblings”**

February 14, 2016

Worship theme: Change

Auction topic: Siblings

**Call to Worship – adapted from Erika Hewitt**

We arrive from many different experiences and backgrounds. Some of us have trouble speaking; others are so young that they’re still learning to talk. Some of us speak English as a second language, and others of us can speak several foreign languages. All of us share this common goal:

*We speak the language of love.*

We lift our voices in song — not to sing perfectly or in tune, but to hear and feel our voices form a life-giving sound; and

*we sing the language of love.*

We form a web of compassionate listening when individuals among us, embodying vulnerability, name the fears that grip their hearts, the joys that buoy their spirits.

*We pray in the language of love.*

At times, our voices clash. We disagree. Tension enters our voices as we make room for different beliefs, different opinions, different perspectives. Through it all, it's our intention that...

*we listen to the language of love.*

In this congregation, we welcome a multiplicity of truths, and invite them to be named out loud. We envision the future when justice and peace will be evident all around us, and

*we cry out in the language of love.*

Let us worship together, making room for one another as whole beings, tender hearts, hungry spirits, and curious minds. With our actions and with our words, let us

*...speak the language of love.*

**Reading:** excerpt from *A Girl Named Zippy* by Haven Kimmel, pages 40-45

My mom and I were sitting on the couch early in the morning, winter dark. I was curled up against her as she worked on a sweater. Dan and Melinda were getting ready for school; I didn't go to school yet and had begun to believe that kindergarten wasn't in my best interests anyway. [...]

My brother was a senior in high school and still rode the school bus every morning to the new high school down the highway. I gathered from conversations I overheard that this was some grave form of injustice, especially in light of the fact that my sister, who was only a sophomore, rode to school in a car with a friend, which meant Danny had to leave earlier than Melinda. In addition to having an unfair ride, most days Melinda got to [our only] bathroom first and then wouldn't come out, even while Danny stood outside the door nervously, watching the clock tick toward the time he had to go.

[...] Danny knocked on the bathroom door.

[...] Inside the bathroom door was a little hook-and-loop that served as a lock.

[...] Dan knocked on the bathroom door with long and serious pauses in between the knocks. Melinda shouted "I'll be out in a minute!" in a way that suggested she had no such intentions.

"Lindy! Let your brother in the bathroom; he has to leave soon," Mom said, without dropping a stitch.

Melinda didn't answer. Dan looked at his watch...then raised his fist and knocked again, harder this time.

"I'll be out soon!" Melinda shouted, with a sort of barely concealed glee.

[...] Dan sat down. He stood up. He paced, then knocked on the door, then sat down. ... There was something about the way Dan stood up for the last time that made me instinctively turn and look at my mom, who stopped knitting. A mighty sound, a sort of giving way, came from the direction of the bathroom, and by the time I looked over, the ... bathroom door was off the hinges and lying on the couch beside me, the little eye still dangling from the little hook lock.

Melinda was just sitting on the edge of the tub, completely dressed, her hair combed, her makeup on. Danny took one look at her, then raised his left arm and slapped her open-handed hard enough that she fell in the tub. Her wail was instantaneous, but my mom and I continued to sit silent as stumps, watching the scene unfold. Danny turned to the sink, where he quickly brushed his teeth and ran a comb through his hair. He was out of the bathroom before Melinda was out of the tub. Mom and I watched him shrug into his winter coat and walk out into the dark to wait on the corner for the bus.

“What are you going to do about this?!” Melinda cried, her hand against her cheek...

“Well Melinda. For heaven’s sake, you provoked him mercilessly.”

“You love him better than me! He’s your favorite!” Melinda said, as she grabbed her coat and made an angry exit.

Mom and I looked at each other. “I’d have slapped her too,” she said. “I would have had to ask someone else to rip the door off the hinges, but *then* I would have slapped her.”

## **Sermon: “Siblings”**

Thank you Lauren, for sharing the reading this morning. And thank you to John Phelan, whom you may know as one of our stalwart ushers. Last winter at our church auction, he was the highest bidder for the prize of inspiring a sermon topic. (Shameless plug for this year’s auction on February 27<sup>th</sup>—there is childcare and a lot of cool things up for sale!)

John chose the topic of siblings, and I am very grateful to him, because he told me other topics he considered, which included head-scratchers like:

“Why do we Unitarians have services on Sunday?” and  
“Why do holidays end on the day of the holiday?”

The sermon would have been “John: I’m not sure. Amen.”

But then, he settled on the topic of siblings in honor of his sister. John wrote me: “My sister and I fought like crazy when we were kids. She was the big sister who knew the one right way to do everything. And I was the little brother who knew there wasn’t only one right way. Now that she’s 65 and I’m 61, she’s still very much the big sister, still looking out for me. She’s about to retire soon, and I hope to teach her some of my goofing off skills.”

I was pleased to have an excuse to talk about a different kind of love on Valentine’s Day than we usually hear about. I hope my words today will also have some meaning for those among us who are only children, and for those who have other

relationships that are sibling-like—with friends, cousins, in-laws.

In fact, as I have mentioned before, the English word “gossip” has its origin in the church community’s idea of us all being “God-siblings,” “God-sibs”—siblings in God’s family. Gossip is the conversation God-siblings have together—if you have ever wondered why news spreads so fast in a church, well that’s why! So, brothers and sisters, siblings of the Spirit, come with me.

I’m about to get Biblical.

When I think siblings, I think:

Cain and Abel.

Jacob and Esau.

Joseph and his many brothers.

And that’s just the first book of the Hebrew Bible!

Now those are some complicated love stories.

Sibling love is not simple.

It never has been.

Cain and Abel are the first brothers of the Bible, they are the children of Adam and Eve. Cain and Abel make offerings to the Lord and the Lord plays favorites. Cain takes his jealous reaction to the extreme and goes beyond knocking a door down, goes beyond a slap on the face: he kills his brother Abel.

Then the Lord says to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’

Seems like a disingenuous question from the Lord, who already knows the answer.

And Cain, in the manner of guilty people, answers a question with a question:

‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’

In response, God punishes Cain with exile from his home.

Jacob and Esau were the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah, grandchildren of Abraham and Sarah.

When Rebekah was pregnant, the book of Genesis says:

The children struggled together within her; and she said, ‘If it is to be this way, why do I live?’

...And the LORD said to her,

‘Two nations are in your womb,

and two peoples born of you shall be divided;  
one shall be stronger than the other,  
the elder shall serve the younger.’

When her time to give birth was at hand... The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterwards his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau’s heel; so he was named Jacob. ...

When the boys grew up, Esau was a skilful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob.

When Jacob and Esau grow up, Rebekah helps her favorite, Jacob, trick his older twin Esau into giving up his birthright inheritance and his father’s blessing. Esau is, of course furious, and wants to kill his brother—but Rebekah helps Jacob escape.

Jacob becomes a blessed, wealthy patriarch, father to twelve brothers. The second youngest of the 12 is Joseph, who is gifted with prophetic dreams. And once again, we see a parent play

favorites. Genesis says that Jacob “loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him.”

Joseph’s brother’s are so mad at him that they debate feeding him to wild animals; killing him outright; and then they finally decide to sell him as a slave.

A lot of things happen to Joseph, which are all covered pretty thoroughly in the musical *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*. Joseph manages to escape slavery, and become a rich and powerful man. Finally, in a scene that pretty much every mistreated younger sibling has daydreamed about, Joseph’s older brothers end up coming to him, pleading for assistance, and they don’t even know that they are begging at the feet of the younger brother they mistreated so badly. Joseph takes pity on them, though he can’t resist playing a few mind games with them first. But then he forgives them, and is truly reunited with his family.

What really gets me about all these Bible stories, as an older sister, is that it seems God is always upsetting the natural birth order of things. In Biblical times birth order really mattered. The older son is supposed to get the glory, the land, the livestock, the wives, the fancy robes, the fatted calf. The younger ones are the spares, the extras.

But again and again in the Bible, the older sibling is ill-favored, punished, his birthright taken away, his younger sibling blessed.

As an older sister I had to look past my annoyance at this theme and take in the larger message.

God always seems interested in making the last become first and the first become last. God wants to lower the powerful and raise up the powerless. In a sibling relationship, where someone always seem to have the upper hand, God seems to always be on the side of the loser, the poor, the powerless, the oppressed, the weak. We might say, “It’s not fair!” And God might say, “No. But it is just.”

Susanne and I were talking about siblings this week and she said, the sibling relationship is sort of an invisible one. It’s true. It’s an incredibly complex, meaningful relationship and yet for many it exists outside of our public day-to-day relationships. It is a lifelong connection with someone we may not live near; we may not be that close to; we may not even like that much; yet we may have seen their face on the day we were born and we may see their face on the day we die. And every interaction that happens in the middle is weighted with meaning. When I asked on Facebook for folks to share stories about their relationship with their siblings, the first half dozen or so responses were “Nope. Not something I can share in public.” I thought that was really interesting—relationships with our siblings are so normal and common-place and yet, so intimate, so private. Follen member Chris Walters replied to my question by posting a picture equal to a thousand words, he simply posted an image of an aluminum can...filled with worms.

I did get one story that a colleague of mine, Joanna, said I could share. She told me about her older brother, Dan. For most of

their life, they haven't been that close. He is twelve years older than her, and they have different lives and different values. But when I asked her about her relationship with Dan, she immediately told me this defining story. Joanna and Dan had an older brother, Jeff. A few days before her tenth birthday, when Dan was 22, and Jeff a few years older than that, Jeff took his own life. In the midst of the family's grief, Dan remembered Joanna's birthday. He was a 22 year old guy, not the kind of person you might think would be especially sensitive to a little girl's needs, especially when he was rocked by his own grief and shock. But he took Joanna and a few of her friends out to see a movie. She said, it was a somber birthday, but he wanted to get her away for a few hours and make sure she knew her birthday was remembered. He was his sister's keeper.

Many thousands of years after the events in the book of Genesis, a man named Jesus told his followers "Love your neighbor." Our siblings remind us, that is no easy task. Our siblings grow up not just next door but in the next room—or the same room. We see them at their most vulnerable, at their most embarrassing, and they see us that way too. We tease them in ways we might never admit to, until we are caught, sitting on the edge of the bathtub, a wicked smile on our face. A word or deed from them goes straight into our psyche, and our souls, for good or for ill. They can wound us in ways few can. They can give us healing that is hard to find from anyone else.

I told you the story of Jacob and Esau, the wily twins who fought even in the womb, but I didn't tell you the whole story. Jacob steals Esau's inheritance, he steals his father's blessing, and he sneaks away in the night. Esau didn't get a chance to

even get one good slap of retribution in there. Jacob makes a successful life for himself, and so does Esau—he does okay, even though his brother had taken so much from him.

But as Jacob grew older, he wanted to reconcile with Esau. He missed his brother. He wanted to be forgiven. He wanted to come home. But he knew that he had committed what many would think is an unforgiveable act. He sends word to Esau that he wants to come back, and bring his family. He gets word back that Esau is coming out to meet him—with 400 men. Yikes.

Jacob is honestly worried his angry brother is going to slaughter his whole family. He decides to try to butter Esau up by sending him lots of livestock as a present. But Esau keeps coming with his army. Jacob can't turn around now. He has many wives, many women and children with him. And so the two big crowds slowly move towards each other on the plains. One group, all men, led by the large and strong Esau. One group, a bunch of women and children and livestock, led by small and wily Jacob.

Jacob's tricks couldn't save him any more. He put the women and children behind him, and walked out ahead. It was time for him to face his brother, and face the music. He must have thought, "This is it."

The scripture reads:

But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, 'Who are these with you?' Jacob said, 'The children whom God has graciously given your

servant.’ ...Esau said, ‘What do you mean by all this company that I met?’ [By which he means, the livestock sent ahead as a gift.] Jacob answered, ‘To find favour with my lord.’ But Esau said, ‘I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.’ Jacob said, ‘No, please; if I find favour with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.’”

My god-siblings; my brothers and sisters of the Follen community, truly to see your face is to see the face of God. And sometimes, like all siblings, we will annoy each other; we may tease each other; I hope we don't ever, ever, slap each other! But I hope we always forgive each other; I hope we can always embrace each other, weep together, and know that to love each other is to share God's love, here on earth.

May it be so because we make it so.

*Amen.*