

## 14A 2023

Today we hear the beginning of the engaging story of Joseph, when he was sold into slavery.

As the story unfolds, he rises to prominence in Egypt and eventually saves his whole family from starvation.

Joseph was the elder son of Jacob and Rachel, the younger being Benjamin.

Joseph also had eleven half-siblings, the children of Jacob and his other wife, Leah, who was the sister of Rachel, so they were really three-quarter (?) siblings.

You will remember that Jacob labored seven years for the hand of Rachel, but then dishonest Laban insisted Jacob marry his elder daughter, Leah, first, so Jacob did, and then labored another seven years to marry her sister, Rachel.

Of course, Rachel and Leah were also Jacob's first cousins, so the three-quarter-siblings were also half double second cousins.

As for Joseph's full brother, Benjamin, he was also Joseph's double second cousin.

Joseph was unprepared for the betrayal.

When we are young, like Joseph, we tend to believe that others think like us.

Psychopaths report believing as children that everyone lacks empathy.

When someone says, "I love you" to a child psychopath, he thinks that it is a form of manipulation, and an ineffective one, at that.

Likewise, people who are highly empathetic tend to think that others are empathetic.

Learning that this is not necessarily so is a difficult part of growing up.

Joseph could not imagine killing a sibling, or selling a sibling into slavery, so he did not anticipate his half-siblings' abuse.

He was mistaken.

Spiritual growth is contingent upon recognizing that we are not all motivated by the same things, do not think the same.

It can be painful to accept the fact that, although *we* know that we are all brothers and sisters, others do not know or do not want to know this.

Some are, in other words, willfully in denial.

They are hurtful, like Joseph's siblings.

One might feel both sad and lonely to realize that many people are uninterested in compassion, have convinced themselves that they know a better way, one that relies on power rather than humility, hatred rather than love, scapegoating rather than brotherhood and sisterhood, lies rather than truth.

I was reading about Modi's rule in India.

He has pursued a kind of Hindu nationalism in which Muslims and Christians become the victims of murderous and sexual violence.

The author describes religious and ethnic nationalism as, “the ultimate subversion of democracy, [where] the government chooses the people, rather than the people choosing the government.”<sup>1</sup>

The sad reality is that one cannot appeal to people who have chosen this path, who have chosen not to face their own and others’ reality.

Writing from a Nazi prison, German theologian, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was in no position to sustain a romanticized or benighted view of his fellow human beings.

In the months before his execution, he considered how a nation of poets, musicians, and philosophers had descended into Nazism, and concluded that:

“Stupidity is a more dangerous enemy of the good than malice. One may protest against evil; it can be exposed and, if need be, prevented by use of force. Evil always carries within itself the germ of its own subversion in that it leaves behind in human beings at least a sense of unease. Against stupidity we are defenseless. Neither protests nor the use of force accomplish anything here; reasons fall on deaf ears; facts that contradict one’s prejudgment simply need not be believed – in such moments the stupid person even becomes critical – and when facts are irrefutable they are just pushed aside as inconsequential, as incidental. In all this the stupid person, in contrast to the malicious one, is utterly self satisfied and,

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1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/08/09/opinion/india-modi-conflict-zone.html>

being easily irritated, becomes dangerous by going on the attack. For that reason, greater caution is called for when dealing with a stupid person than with a malicious one. Never again will we try to persuade the stupid person with reasons, for it is senseless and dangerous.”<sup>2</sup>

Bonhoeffer explains that evil always carries within itself the germ of its own demise.

In other words, evil makes us uneasily aware that, at some level, we are out of step with God’s sacred order.

Stupidity, on the other hand, as Bonhoeffer describes it, is chosen to numb us.

By the way, Bonhoeffer uses the word *Dummheit*, or stupidity, and not *Unwissenheit*, or ignorance.

Ignorance is simply a lack of information.

Stupidity is elected blindness.

We choose to be blind to the truth because it is more comfortable.

No amount of facts or appeals can break through.

When the resultant comforting blindness is threatened, the stupid person becomes violent.

What is the solution?

Bonhoeffer continues:

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<sup>2</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, ‘After Ten Years’ in *Letters and Papers from Prison* (Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works/English, vol. 8) Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.

‘If we want to know how to get the better of stupidity, we must seek to understand its nature. This much is certain, that it is in essence not an intellectual defect but a human one. There are human beings who are of remarkably agile intellect yet stupid, and others who are intellectually quite dull yet anything but stupid.’<sup>3</sup>

I frequently encounter people who assume that education will rid us of all human faults, but Bonhoeffer argues that stupidity is unrelated to any other aspect of a human being.

It is a moral failing available to all.

Bonhoeffer describes the conditions under which stupidity flourishes:

Upon closer observation, it becomes apparent that every strong upsurge of power in the public sphere, be it of a political or of a religious nature, infects a large part of humankind with stupidity. It would even seem that this is virtually a sociological-psychological law. The power of the one needs the stupidity of the other. The process at work here is not that particular human capacities, for instance, the intellect, suddenly atrophy or fail. Instead, it seems that under the overwhelming impact of rising power, humans are deprived of their inner independence, and, more or less consciously, give up establishing an autonomous position toward the emerging circumstances.<sup>4</sup>

Simply put, power and stupidity are codependent.

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3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

They grow together.

People become swept up, in other words, in a deformation or cancer in the noosphere, a perversion of consciousness.

Among Joseph's many brothers, only Reuben was able to resist.

Nine of Joseph's siblings were caught in a shared attitude of scapegoating.

People lose their awareness of reality.

Intentionally.

Otherwise, how could they happily pass around on social media the images of sexual violence against Christians and Muslims in India?

Bonhoeffer effectively describes the situation:

In conversation with [such people], one virtually feels that one is dealing not at all with a person, but with slogans, catchwords and the like that have taken possession of him. He is under a spell, blinded, misused, and abused in his very being. Having thus become a mindless tool, the stupid person will also be capable of any evil and at the same time incapable of seeing that it is evil. This is where the danger of diabolical misuse lurks, for it is this that can once and for all destroy human beings.<sup>5</sup>

Bonhoeffer's writing sheds light on how an avid churchgoer could also be a slave holder, or a devoted father a Dachau guard.

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5 Ibid.

Bonhoeffer argues that external conditions must change in order to reduce stupidity:

. . . in most cases a genuine internal liberation becomes possible only when external liberation has preceded it. Until then we must abandon all attempts to convince the stupid person. This state of affairs explains why in such circumstances our attempts to know what ‘the people’ really think are in vain and why, under these circumstances, this question is so irrelevant for the person who is thinking and acting responsibly.<sup>6</sup>

Polls are not the solution.

Intelligent people must work to reduce power such that stupidity does not thrive.

Modi has done the opposite of this in India.

How do we avoid being a Joseph?

How do we recognize when we are dealing with a stupid person?

Look for false individualism.

They may possess individualist bravado, but in the end, stupid people are pulled along by the crowd.

They manifest an unwarranted heightened sense of emotion when someone disagrees.

They are not interested in listening, as their minds are made up.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

They suffer from an intellectual laziness, an unwillingness to do the necessary work when challenged by facts or the analyses of others.

Facts tend to be inconvenient to us all, but some people simply will not hear them.

Sadly, stupidity has entered into American Christianity, which is in crisis.

Russell Moore left the Southern Baptist Convention over white nationalism and the mishandling of the sexual abuse crisis.

People would not countenance his critique.

The contribution of people like Moore as well as our own contribution is significant in that we resist the external conditions that support stupidity.

We stand against such a perversion of holiness wherever it occurs in the world not only with our deeds, but with our very being, our prayers, and our willingness to see the truth.

We remain humble, we listen, and we practice awareness when we are confronted by those who do not share those values.

Being right means having the right approach, not the right answer.

There is little we can do for those who refuse to engage with reality.

What we can do is to create a place of reduced power where people reject scapegoating, listen to one another, respect one another, and value people and God above opinions.



We can be a light of hope on the hill for those who long for meaningful presence and community, a steadfast outpost of the gospel.

Over time, this can be like drops of chlorine in bad water.