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Echoes: A Minority People

Genesis 34:1-12

Genesis 34:1-12. *Now Dinah the daughter of Leah, whom she had borne to Jacob, went out to visit the women of the region. When Shechem son of Hamor the Hivite, prince of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. And his soul was drawn to Dinah daughter of Jacob; he loved the girl, and spoke tenderly to her. So Shechem spoke to his father Hamor, saying, 'Get me this girl to be my wife.'*

Now Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but his sons were with his cattle in the field, so Jacob held his peace until they came. And Hamor the father of Shechem went out to Jacob to speak with him, just as the sons of Jacob came in from the field. When they heard of it, the men were indignant and very angry, because he had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob's daughter, for such a thing ought not to be done.

But Hamor spoke with them, saying, 'The heart of my son Shechem longs for your daughter; please give her to him in marriage. Make marriages with us; give your daughters to us, and take our daughters for yourselves. You shall live with us; and the land shall be open to you; live and trade in it, and get property in it.' Shechem also said to her father and to her brothers, 'Let me find favour with you, and whatever you say to me I will give. Put the marriage present and gift as high as you like, and I will give whatever you ask me; only give me the girl to be my wife.'

I need to give you some context for the reading you just heard – which is *not* one you hear a lot in church. Jacob was a stranger, a foreign immigrant to the land of Canaan. Sure, he was third generation, but he was still a foreigner. His grandfather Abraham had moved there originally, but had remained an outsider – tolerated because he was wealthy, but only tolerated. Jacob's father Isaac had been even less popular with the Canaanites, and the more God blessed him, the more conflict he had had with the people of the land. There's only so much pasture land to go around, after all, and the Hebrews were taking Canaanite jobs. Besides, Abraham and Isaac and Jacob had a weird religion. Unlike *everyone* else in the Ancient World, these foreigners worshipped only one God. So that's the background: Jacob and his family lived the delicate balance of being recent immigrants to a strange land. And that's when these events take place: Shechem, the prince of the nearest city, raped Jacob's daughter Dinah. Now Genesis tells us that Shechem genuinely loved Dinah and wanted to marry her. (To some that might make the rape sound slightly less horrible, but before coming to that conclusion we would need to know how Dinah felt about it.) Anyway, Shechem's father, Hamor, comes over to begin marriage negotiations. Here's his argument: "Your daughters marry our sons, our daughters marry your sons, and we become one people. It'll be good for trade, and we'll all get rich. What do you say?"

Now, briefly, let me summarize the rest of the story. Dinah's brothers have no intention of going along with Hamor's plan, but they pretend that they will – so long as all the Canaanite men agree to be circumcised, because their religion requires that they only deal with men who've had that surgery. Now, I'm assuming that was a tough sell to the Canaanite men, but Shechem's father uses the same argument back with his own people. "Just do this one little thing, and it'll open a door to trade. Jacob's wealth will soon be ours." So, the men of the city get circumcised, which leaves them . . . sore . . . during which time two of Jacob's sons come in with swords and slaughter all the men of the city. Then the rest of Jacob's sons go in and loot it of everything valuable – including, the text says, all their wives and children.

So it's not the most inspiring story. But it can be edifying, because in this narrative we see at least two distinct ways in which the people of a minority faith can relate to the dominant culture. But, you might wonder, why would we care about that? Christianity isn't a minority faith in the US of A. Still around 70% of Americans claim affiliation with some Christian church, and in surveys about 50% of us claim to have attended worship in the past seven days. Nearly all our national politicians claim Christian affiliation, and we've *never* had a president who didn't. We're hardly a small, beleaguered minority group. And yet . . . and yet, a nation in which Christianity is a minority is not that hard to imagine. That 70% who claim Christian affiliation – that's

down 15-20% in the past 30 years. A lot of people are disappearing from church, and at a faster rate all the time. The decade from 2000 to 2010 saw so many empty pews that Methodist scholar Lovett Weems calls those years the “attendance recession.” Another author just calls it “the horrible decade.” As for that 50% who say they were in church in the past week, sociologist Penny Marler compared that survey data with actual records and concluded that – to put it bluntly – about half of those people were lying. 25% in church begins to sound like a minority, doesn’t it? Worst of all, in terms of long-term institutional prospects, the group that is least involved in church is young adults. So I guess what I’m saying is that these are the long-term trends, and working on the assumption that the latest evangelism program from Discipleship Resources is not going to miraculously turn it all around, there may in fact be some value in our asking what it is like to be a minority faith. Which takes us back to Genesis 34.

Here’s one option: being absorbed into the majority culture. In our scripture, that’s what Hamor proposes. “Hey, you should settle in with us. We can be one people, without any differences at all. It’ll be good for business.” When you think about it, in fact, that’s already what a lot of us do. This is what happens when a church adjusts its unique teachings so as to conform to the principles of the larger society. Eventually, when a church does this enough, that church becomes just a tool of the society. This is what happened when the American church found ways to justify slavery and the extermination of Native Americans. This is what is going on every time a faith group becomes an advocate for one economic system or political party. In the Southern Baptist church of my childhood, many believe that God is Republican. In my adopted church, this one, many believe that God is a Democrat. Both are wrong. We cannot force our faith into any cultural container, or we destroy the faith. When a church gets assimilated by society, it becomes a slave of society, and serves neither God nor others.

But our story offers another option: war. Dinah’s brothers have no intention of being absorbed by their society. Instead, they insist that the society become like them – even physically. “You Canaanites must follow *our* customs, or no deal.” But this was not just hard-sell evangelism. This was pure deceitfulness. In fact, what they wanted was to rule. They wanted it all. Yes, they had reason to be angry after their sister had been raped, but the fact that they slaughtered everyone and then went in and plundered the city and took all the Canaanite women for themselves seems to me to cast some doubt on the purity of their motives.

We see this option in our present society as well. Just as there are some Christians and Christian groups who are willing to bend all sorts of rules to conform to culture, there are others who do everything in their power to set up “culture” as the enemy. You’ve heard them. These are the ones who talk about how Christians are persecuted in America. Really? In North Korea, tens of thousands are in slave labor camps because they are Christian. That’s persecution. Having to balance Christian songs with non-Christian ones at school Christmas concerts – that’s not. Being beheaded for your faith in Christ in northern Iraq is persecution; the Happy Holidays sign at Sears is not. But some still trumpet that alarm! Christians are a persecuted minority! We must take back our nation for Christ! When you hear those voices, take a moment and ask this question: what are those people getting from their cries of alarm? I suspect that you will find they gain a great deal from them – in terms of ratings and votes and book sales, for instance. Like Jacob’s sons who really just wanted to plunder the city of Shechem, those Christians who call for war with society generally have their own agendas as well.

Here’s the good news: as we consider the ways that we, people of faith, relate to our society, unconditional surrender and war are not the only options. We do not have to give in to the customs of the land – we can represent a different way. But we do not have to take over the culture for our voice to be heard. And yes, we do have much to say to society. Starting next week, I’ll begin talking about exactly what the church has to say to the culture around us, but here’s a hint. In Genesis 34, the people of God would not be conforming to Canaanite culture. Nor would it be slaughtering that culture and taking slaves. I think that the people of God would have been sitting with and listening to Dinah in her pain and standing up for the Canaanite women and children in their bereavement.

Those people aren’t there in this story. But that’s where they should have been.