

Family Tree

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Genesis 28:10-17; 1 Corinthians 15:1-11

To begin this sermon I have a warning. And the warning is that this sermon – these next fifteen minutes or so -- may not be very relevant to you if you come from a perfect family. If you come from a family that has it all figured out, has no squabbles, or conflicts, or brokenness or divorce or betrayal – then best you right now turn on your iPhone and check your email, texts and tweets because this sermon will have nothing to do with you. But if there is a chance that you don't come from a perfect family – that your family tree is not entirely harmonious and placid and peaceful – then maybe you might find the next 15 minutes of some interest.

It's not that we don't work hard to project as "perfect a family as possible" to the world. Facebook is filled with 99.9% happy family pictures. I have yet to see a picture on Instagram of families screaming at each other, or a couple contemplating divorce, or parents grounding their 16 year old son. That doesn't usually make it into our social media network. And so it is tempting to idolize the external appearances of families close to us and wonder why they have it so much better than we do. It usually isn't the case. Every family tree has some weak limbs, some severed roots, some diseased core. This week we took down a couple of our stately Laurel Oaks in the courtyard and the place looks a lot different. And there was something in me that hated to see that happen – especially when leaves still hung from their branches. But the truth is the trees weren't as healthy as they appeared. Frankly, they were hollowed on the inside and miraculously did not fall in the storm. Appearances in trees, family trees included, can be deceiving.

So over the last couple of years I've taken some time to look back on my family tree. Many of you have

heard me extol the headline of the McConnell family tree – great-grandfather a Presbyterian minister, grandfather a Presbyterian minister, father and uncle Presbyterian ministers, two brothers Presbyterian ministers. "Talk about a dysfunctional family." I say it to be funny, but there's truth in it of course. Every family is dysfunctional in its own way. Except for those of you with the perfect family. A closer look into my family and you see things like alcoholism, death from addiction, prostitution, divorce, adultery, severed relationships, bankruptcy, suicide – and that's just going back a couple of generations. But again those are not the pictures I put onto my Facebook page.

Even now you might be thinking about your own family tree – and the cast of characters is nothing Hollywood could reproduce. We all have saints and sinners in our past. Scoundrels and heroes. Aunt Martha who sewed blankets for the Red Cross, and Uncle Charley who spent most of his time at the corner bar. Pete and Judy, the perfect couple, who broke up when their last kid left for college. Cousin Larry who hit it big in Silicon Valley and Cousin Theresa who is battling stage 3 cancer. Brother Mark who you are no longer talking to and sister Susan who you call every day. The family trees of you and me have all sorts of leaves of all sorts of colors.

The Biblical family tree is itself quite colorful. A couple of weeks ago when we were looking at the call of Moses – which we will look at again next week – we heard God refer to himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God puts his name to the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Let me tell you this is not the family that makes it onto the cover of Family Circle magazine. And not only that but the good Lord opens up his Facebook page and starts posting these pictures of his family – and many are not very pretty. Abraham and his brother have a real estate deal that went south. Isaac's wife cheats on her husband and robs her oldest son of his family blessing. Brothers Jacob and Esau sever their relationship for a time. Jacob plays favorites among his sons and what follows is an attempted fratricide. This family that is supposed to be embodying the promise of God – the

story of God – has got enough dysfunction in it to land them instead on the cover of Psychology Today.

So in the midst of all this generational ups and downs, joys and sorrows, sinners and saints – our story finds Jacob who is pretty much on the run from his brother who hates him – having cheated his brother out of the family blessing – we find the scoundrel Jacob out in the wilderness – no roof for a head and a stone for a pillow – sleeping under the stars. And he has a dream (dreams are big in the Bible) and he dreams of a ladder – a ladder that stretches from the earth to heaven – a ladder that stretches from his own self, his own soul, his own place in life – and the ladder is connecting to the heavens -- and ascending and descending the ladder are the angels of God. And God says in the dream, "Know that I am with you, Jacob, and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."

Now I submit to you that this is a startling word from God. This is a startling word from God because it sounds like what God is saying is that when it comes to the movement of his gracious story – when it comes to the advance of his promise – when it comes to the company of angels – even the sinners and the scoundrels have a part to play. When it comes to the movement of God's gracious story – when it comes to the advance of God's promise – when it comes to the company of God's angels – even the sinners and the scoundrels have a part to play.

Yes, even the sinners and the scoundrels in your world. In your family tree. In your relationship database. Even the sinner and the scoundrel inside of you! Because you see when we talk of the grace of God – we are tempted to think only of the grace of God which forgives and cleanses me and you from sin – but that is just the tip of the iceberg, I think, when it comes to the grace of God. The grace of God is a movement, a power, an advance that works its way through every single person. Saint and sinner alike. Like it or not, we are who we are because of this family tree upon which we hang. Sometimes it is in the grace given, grace received. The grace of God is operative through every human being that steps into and out of our lives. Sometimes it's hard to see. Sometimes our prayer might be to rid ourselves of such people. Sometimes our desire is to shake loose from the family tree – but the truth is God's grace is at work through all the color of the tree. Not just our families, but every person that steps into our lives. Lord knows, if God's grace can work through me, God's grace can work through anybody!

When the apostle Paul took the time to consider his part in the unfolding kingdom of heaven and the start of the church – the only thing Paul could do was, I'm sure, laugh. If ever there was one to be disqualified from playing a role in the advancement of grace – it was Paul. "I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God," he says, "I am who I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain."

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