

It Happens in the Best of Families

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Genesis 50:15-21

Last week we talked about family trees and how within every family tree there are these boxes and lines that indicate human beings and their relationships. Inside every box there is a human soul with all its intricacies – its hopes, dreams, disappointments, failures, successes. And every line, every relationship has its love, hate, indifference, hurt, healing, loyalty and betrayal. It was a tree like this that Abram and Sarai had been promised and this is the tree that Abram and Sarai had prayed for. Be careful what you pray for.

Case in point – the family of Jacob. Jacob is the grandson of Abraham and Sarah. The Bible gives him two names – actually an angel gives him another name - Israel – the namesake of the Promised Land. Jacob is somewhat of a scoundrel and he manages as a young man to tear his own family apart by deception and selfishness. But in the end he is shown grace by his brother and the family is reconciled. So Jacob has his own family – 12 sons – and beginning in chapter 37 of Genesis we hear the story of Jacob and his sons. It is not a pretty story. When you read the story of Jacob and his sons it's like watching a train wreck in slow motion. It's like watching one of those suspense movies where it seems so clear what mistakes the characters are making, what dark rooms they should avoid – but there isn't anything you can do about it. Jacob and his twelve sons do just about everything wrong when it comes to being a family. Would that we had the time to read the fourteen chapters of the Jacob family tree, but we don't. The story centers around one of Jacob's sons – Joseph. Joseph is father's favorite and that's where things start to fall apart. It's one thing as a parent to have a favorite – it's another thing to make a public announcement about it. Jacob makes a public announcement about it and buys

Joseph a spectacular coat – tradition calls it the coat of many colors – just to make no mistake that Joseph is the favorite. To make matters worse Joseph shares his dreams with his brother and they happen to be dreams that suggest the brothers will be subservient to him. Daddy's little favorite is now pulling rank. So we know where this is going. Daddy and his favorite little boy push the limit and before you know it the 11 brothers have had the course and now it's time to get rid of Junior. And so they get rid of Junior. Sell him into slavery. Joseph ends up down in Egypt – sold to an Egyptian official – Potiphar. He's Potiphar's slave and Potiphar's wife like what she sees in the young Hebrew and she makes her move for him. Joseph resists and that lands him in jail. Long story a little bit longer – Joseph ends up interpreting some dreams for Pharaoh and Pharaoh likes what he hears and brings Joseph into his court and makes him Secretary of Agriculture. Joseph puts together a plan to save Egypt from the ravages of famine and Joseph becomes a national hero. Things, on the other hand, don't go so well for the spiteful brothers – the same famine has devastated the family farm -- so they are forced to go and beg for help from the neighboring Egypt unaware that it's their brother they are begging from. Finally comes the moment of truth when Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and while he is reunited to his loving father, Joseph has been cheated for many years out of the most important relationship of his life.

I suppose if you have ever wondered about your own family – wondered over some of the broken, dysfunctional pieces of your family tree – you might find some solace comparing your tribe to Jacob's tribe. It's hard to top Jacob and his ancestors and descendants when it comes to family brokenness. In fact it's rather startling the stunning transparency of the Bible and its story of Jacob, Joseph and God. The Genesis writer spends nearly a third of the book telling this sordid tale of favoritism and betrayal and heartbreak. Not a very good job if Genesis is supposed to be the testimony of Israel to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Jacob and his boys today wouldn't probably make it on the cover of *Christian*

Family magazine. Compare this to the recent political conventions that featured family members standing at the podium gushing over how wonderful their father, their husband, their mother, their wife is. Lordy, lordy – we've got the perfect, All-American families up there telling us about one-third the story.

But the Bible tries to tell us the whole story – and the whole story about families – your family and mine – is that it's not all peaches and cream. None of us got born to parents with Ph.D.'s in parenting. Each of them were trying to figure it out on the fly. And I suspect none of us made it very easy for them. For the most part each family is trying to figure out how to do it the best they can. Mistakes are made. In fact, families are the great laboratory of experiment. And any good laboratory, any good effort to get it right, any good attempt to figure out the right formula – will be riddled with mistakes. I can only imagine an outside observer peering into my family while my parents tried to parent their four boys – or as Amanda and I tried to parent our daughter – jumping up and saying, “Oh no, don't do that. Oh no, don't say that.” But there is this one thing about families – they tend to be filled with humans. And boy whenever you get humans around there are bound to be mistakes.

I've told you before of the time that despite my father telling me a hundred times not to throw the rubber coated hardball against the garage wall I went out and did it anyway and promptly threw the ball through the garage window. And so there I sat waiting for him to come home and waiting for him to dispense the obligatory parental wrath, “Didn't I tell you,” I expected him to say, “not to throw the ball against

the garage.” It's what I expected him to say. And so imagine my surprise when I heard him say, “Well son, it happens in the best of families.”

Now don't think I didn't pay for a new window out of my allowance – but it may have been the greatest sermon my preacher father ever preached to me – “Son, you're in a family and in every family mistakes will be made.”

Now it's one thing to throw a baseball through a window and it's another thing to sell your brother into slavery – and it all points to the spectrum of mistakes that get made inside the human family. Sometimes terrible mistakes. Sometimes terrible hurt. Sometimes terrible regret. And thank God for the Bible to be honest enough to assure us that if mistakes were made inside our families – well then that makes us pretty Biblical. That makes us pretty much like the children of God. That makes us pretty much a part of God's story. Now the interesting thing about God's story is that it is not just about mistakes. Lord knows there's enough of them in the Bible – right from the very beginning of the Garden of Eden. Mistakes will be made. And what this has led some to believe is that God's story is all about God finding our mistakes and making us feel pretty bad about them. That the story of God is the story of the Father in heaven who is walking around with a ruler in his hand ready to slap someone when they get out of line. That the story of God is about some referee calling fouls on our family.

But that's not the whole story. Actually the whole story is about something entirely different. And we find a great example of how the whole story is different when we read the end of Joseph's story.

“God is always appealing to the better angels of our nature.”

Fourteen chapters of heartache and brokenness and betrayal end up with these verses at the end of the story: Genesis 50: 15-21.

Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?"¹⁶ So they approached Joseph, saying, "Your father gave this instruction before he died,¹⁷ 'Say to Joseph: I beg you, forgive the crime of your brothers and the wrong they did in harming you.' Now therefore please forgive the crime of the servants of the God of your father."

Joseph wept when they spoke to him.¹⁸ Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves."¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God?²⁰ Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today.²¹ So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

You see there is something remarkable about this whole story of God. And what is remarkable about this whole story of God is when people like you and me and Joseph look inside our broken, mistake-filled families we can see that the story isn't only about the mistakes. In fact, what we see is that the story is always going to have mistakes. But what we can also see, because this is God's story, is that God is still somehow in the middle of it all trying to push it to good.

It would be a mistake for us to think that God makes our mistakes happen – or that God wants us to somehow suffer through to the solution – that could not be further from the truth. But instead – given our humanness and given our inclination toward goofing up and given the fact that none of us scored perfectly on being a family member – God is still in the middle of it trying to push it to the good.

And the way that God seeks to push it to the good is to appeal to the good that is already inside of us. It was only two weeks ago that we hear back in Genesis 1

that when God created us what he saw was good. And that is always going to be the case – God is always going to see the good in you. And when we know that God is always going to see the good in us – then that is the chance to see what role we can play in helping the good Lord push the story forward. God is always appealing to the better angels of our nature.

Amanda and I went to see the movie Sully last weekend. I can talk about this movie because we all know how it's going to end. A terrible thing happens in the sky – on takeoff a plane flies into a swarm of birds and loses both engines. And the pilot Sully Sullenberger does all within his power to save the 155 souls on that plane and lands the plane in the Hudson River. But that's not the end of the story. No the rest of the story is about these human beings who see that a plane has just landed in the Hudson and they've got minutes before the story comes to a really bad ending. And so what do they do? They do what is inside them to do. They rescue. They pilot their boats to the wreck. They throw lifelines. They dive into freezing water. Because the failed engines and the ditched plane are not the end of the story. It is within us to push the story toward good.

I will never tire of reminding you of that great scene in *Les Miserable* when the fugitive Jean Valjean is received as a guest by the gracious bishop. And after being given a hot meal and a warm bed for the night – Jean Valjean steals away in the middle of the night with the Bishop's silver. And when he's caught and dragged before the Bishop to be identified for final condemnation, the Bishop embraces the fugitive and pushes the story to the good and tells him that in his haste to leave he forgot to take the silver candlesticks. And he gives the candlesticks. Push the story to the good.

And isn't that the way it always works – that time and time again we find ourselves in those moments when the story could tip one way or the other. When the mistakes are the only thing we seem to see and we want so much for the story to be about the mistakes. When Joseph looks at his brothers and sees eleven

men who did a despicable thing to him – oh boy, what a great chance for this story to descend into bitterness, family division and revenge. Oh boy. But then there is this One who looks into our lives and looks into our story and looks into our family and sees the good that can come out of it. Not the perfect, but the good. And Joseph speaks kindly and says, "You intended harm, but God intends good."

Do you remember the little poem – often attributed to Mother Theresa, but actually the words of a Brooklyn born educator named Kent Keith? It's called *The Paradoxical Commandments* and they did in fact hang on the wall of Mother Theresa's children's home in Calcutta. A part of it goes like this:

People are illogical, unreasonable, and self-centered.

Love them anyway.

If you do good, people will accuse you of selfish ulterior motives.

Do good anyway.

If you are successful, you will win false friends and true enemies.

Succeed anyway.

The good you do today will be forgotten tomorrow.

Do good anyway.

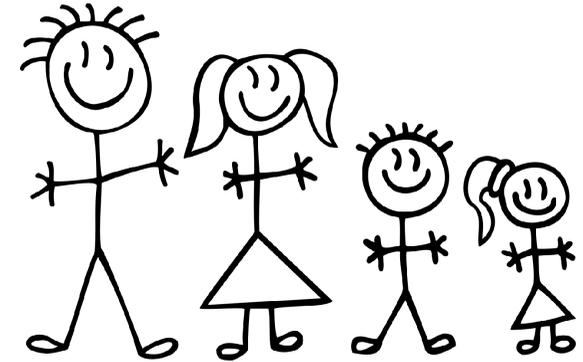
People really need help but may attack you if you do help them.

Help people anyway.

Give the world the best you have and you'll get kicked in the teeth.

Give the world the best you have anyway.

I don't know what is inside your story. I don't know what mistakes have been made. I don't know the depths of the disappointment. But it doesn't have to be the end of the story. God is in their somewhere. God is in you somewhere. And if it's God's story – then the push will always be to the good.



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Church of the Palms

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