

Family Matters

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Genesis 45:1-15 & Psalm 133

What happens in our family matters. It is often the matters of our family that make us, or break us. We discover our gifts inside of our family and our faults as well.

Joseph had the Gift of Interpreting dreams.

What gifts do you have? What talents did God give you? Are these similar to the same gifts and talents that your parents or grandparents had? Joseph received God's blessing from his father Jacob even though he was not the oldest. Jacob tricked his father and brother in order to receive the birthright double portion and to receive the legacy of God's blessing from his grandfather Abraham, and father Isaac. Joseph is intelligent, keen, and resilient, able to survive through many of life's hardships. Joseph is tough, like great-grandfather who set out on his own long ago from Ur because God promised that his children would be as many as the stars in the heavens and sands of the sea.

Their legacy was to inherit the Promised Land and settle there, living in the land of milk and honey.

I am the youngest of 5 children.

I am resourceful. I have a great sense of humor. I am a good cook. I take risks and have been the first in my family to achieve bachelor's and master's degrees. I have received many blessings from my parents, and from my grandparents. My faith I inherited from my grandmother, my resourcefulness as well. Not only myself, but all of us five kids take after our grandmother's resourcefulness and faith. You might say that we are the living legacy of my grandparents. Three of us have taken on leadership roles in our churches.

I have seen many things in my life. I have seen the blessings that have been passed down from my grandparents to me, and I have seen the troubles that have been passed down through the generations. One day, my granddaddy and granny were very upset with my mom when she was 15 years old, and as was their custom in their day, they spank her. Only on this day, they lost control of their anger. My mother in her anger, vowed to marry the first man she met. And she did marry shortly thereafter at the age of 15 – her husband only slightly older, 16 years old. Soon she had 4 children and was a very young woman raising children.

Anger set this chain of events in motion, and that emotional legacy has been passed down from grandmother, to mother, to daughter, to granddaughter, to great-granddaughter. I have seen five generations suffer from the emotional leftovers from a fateful day long ago.

Legacies for Good and for Bad

We inherit legacies for good and bad. We also pass on legacies for good, and unfortunately bad. Each time we do not learn the lessons before us, each time our life goes on unexamined, each time we fail to live fully into the maturity that Christ grants us, we will, without a doubt pass on the bad legacies we have inherited as well. Both possibilities dwell within us all.

The Story of Two Wolves

Perhaps you have heard the story of two wolves?

A Grandfather from the Cherokee Nation was talking with his grandson.

“A fight is going on inside me,” he said to the boy.

“It is a terrible fight and it is between two wolves.”

“One wolf is evil and ugly: He is anger, jealousy, regret, lies, false pride, selfishness and arrogance.”

“The other wolf is beautiful and good: He is joyful, he is peace, love, hope, humility, generosity, compassion, and gratitude.”

“This same fight is going on inside of you and inside every other human as well.”

The grandson paused in deep reflection because of what his grandfather had just said.

Then he finally asked: “Grandfather, which wolf will win?”

The elder Cherokee replied, “The wolf that you feed.”

Legacies are being passed on all the time

What lessons have you learned from your grandparents? What gifts and blessings have they passed on to you as a legacy? What negative legacies have you inherited unwillingly? Have we managed to grow into better more mature people than those who came before us? Some of us yes, some of us no.

Psalm 133 reminds us of the importance of unity among our families. How beautiful when we get along with one another. It is too bad that Joseph’s family had such a hard time of it.

How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along! – Psalm 133:1

Joseph’s story is Our Story.

Judah was the baby of the family. Judah was the beloved son of Leah and Jacob, when Rachel had no children. Judah’s name means “praise the Lord” according to Leah in the scripture. I am sure he enjoyed being favored as the youngest. But then came along more brothers from two maids – but they were not born of Jacob’s wife directly. Judah must have become jealous when Rachel bore a new favored child, Joseph, the most loved by his father. And as brothers do, he along with the others teased his brother Joseph, especially when Joseph shared his dream of dominating the family. Ruben, the eldest, was much more level headed, and tried to keep the peace. Even when the nine of them tried to kill Joseph, Ruben made a plan to rescue him out of the pit. But he got there too late.

When Joseph was 17 years old his older brother Judah sold him into slavery for 20 pieces of silver. From 17 to 30 years old, his life was filled with many ups and downs, from slavery to servant in the royal household, to being accused of rape and being imprisoned, then released and tested by the interpretation of Pharaoh's dream itself. For 13 years he suffered at the hands of his brothers' jealousy. For 13 years he struggled alone to make a way out of no way. And yet, for 13 years he learned to trust in God and the gifts that God had given him – the gift to interpret dreams, and the ability to hear God speaking to him in his hour of need. During this time, Joseph learned diplomacy, how to deal with those who have authority over him, and at the age of 30 Joseph became governor of Pharaoh's land and its grain and produce.

A severe drought was in the land two years when his brothers came to him the second time asking for food. At this time Joseph was 39 years old, married with two sons. Twenty-two years had passed since he had seen his brothers, and in the meantime he was no longer a boy, but a man of great power and prestige. It is from this lectionary passage that we come to believe that Joseph is a forgiving man...but his story of forgiveness does not begin here. When he first sees his brothers, he acted just like his father Jacob – who tricked his father into giving him a blessing. He acted just like his brother Judah, who sold him into slavery, and just like his great-uncle Laban who tried to take away everything that Jacob had earned. And what of his grandmother Rebecca – who schemed to fool her husband with some stew and animal skins on Jacob's arms. Joseph tricked them – his brothers –twice. He sent them back with their money to scare them. Then on their second trip he hid in his baby brother Benjamin's bag his own silver cup to entrap them to come back to his household.

We should not say that Joseph is such a forgiving man, for he toyed with his brothers, and increased their shame for what they did to him and to his father.

In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. - Ephesians 4:26

How often do our emotions get the best of us? How often does the worst of us, determine our life's course? This was certainly the case for Judah. He let his jealousy get the best of him and it followed him for the rest of his life, until the moment he comes face to face with losing his brother Benjamin to Pharaoh's governor, whom he does not know is Joseph.

Judah takes responsibility for his past sin

This story we read today in Genesis is of Joseph no longer able to control himself. Yet this forgiveness comes on the heels of a very significant scene. It is of Judah taking full responsibility for his past sin – of offering himself into slavery to save the life of his baby brother in order also to save the life of his father. It is at this moment – when Joseph loses control. The one, who sold him into slavery, stands up and becomes accountable. And now Joseph reveals himself to his brothers and confesses God has put him there to preserve their life during the famine. Through his power and prestige, all the good he has brought upon the house of pharaoh, Joseph is able to bring all the family, flocks, children and possessions to settle on the choicest land that pharaoh gives to his father Jacob.

Joseph saves his family, he inherits the blessing and promise given by God to his great-grandfather Abraham, yet he will not see that promise fulfilled. God will continue to redeem his people through this family, with its legacies of love, resiliency, hard work, and faithfulness. But God has to work with this same people to train them to let go of the negative legacies they have inherited as well – deceitfulness, short-temperedness, infighting and jealousy among their brothers and sisters.

Feed the Good Wolf; let the negative legacies die with you.

They must learn to feed the good wolf within. They must allow the bad legacies that they have inherited from their father to die within them. Let us allow to die the anger, jealousy, regret, false pride, lies, selfishness that lies within us.

Too often we see Family Problems – continuing generation after generation. We see the cycle of poverty and divorce continue beyond one generation. Let us feed the goodness within us, and discover what is truly beautiful. Joy and peace, love and hope, humility, generosity, compassion, and gratitude.

In Christ, you see, we are a new creation; we can live into the promise of discipleship and share in the beauty of that redemption. But we must be willing to wrestle like Jacob with our life and find the blessings in the midst of our challenges.

May we learn from Joseph and from the conflict he had with his brothers. May we learn from our own families, and learn from the elders and saints within our church. May we learn from our mistakes and grow into the fullness of Christ's blessing for our lives. Let us remember what the Psalmist says...

How wonderful, how beautiful, when brothers and sisters get along! – Psalm 133:1

Amen.