

FAMILY LOVE

Genesis 37: 1-11; 45: 1-4; Matthew 23: 37-39

Our most important and fulfilling relationships are found here, but also, our most disappointing and troubling ones. We experience the greatest joys here, but also the deepest hurt and sadness. We experience our greatest meaning and purpose here, but also real distress, bitterness and helplessness. All this and more are lived in and through our families. Families are our greatest gift and our greatest challenge.

We don't choose our families. We're born into them. We can choose how to negotiate our family relationships. But we're also deeply enmeshed in them finding it difficult to extricate ourselves from all the dynamics, tensions and issues. Choices are made for us in our families. We benefit from them, depend on them and build on them. But we also carry the burden and the failure of them too. How do we find our way to life-giving love, God's love, as we ponder how to love better in our families?

Let's delve into our scripture reading for some wisdom and revelation. Our Old Testament reading is an early story in the bible about the founding family of Israel. Even though the family is important, it doesn't mean it's healthy. In fact, this family is as dysfunctional as they get. There is secrecy, hurt and betrayal. There is anger, revenge and murder. There is backstabbing, gossip, malice and deceit. So why is this family the chosen one? Why is God working God's purposes through such a bad network of relationships? Let me offer three points.

1) First, it's not in our control. The families we're born into and grow up in are outside our control. There is chance here, and randomness. Some of us are really lucky, others of us less so. Where we're born as much as the families into which we are born are not our choice. But where there is chance, randomness and little control, there is also grace. What is grace? Grace is gift and grace is love. Grace is the gift of love. It is a gift because it has nothing to do with what we earn or deserve or achieve. And the gift is to be loved simply because we are, flaws and limitations and all.

But do we experience our families as gifts of love? For many of us, it's easy to cherish our families as gifts of love. But not for all of us. For some of us, the love is so rich and real for all our families' limitations and imperfections, that we feel the gift of it all vividly. For others of us there is pain, hurt and disappointment, and these are obstacles to grace. To find the goodness and love is difficult. Keeping our distance may be safer and sometimes we need to

develop healthier patterns in our lives outside a family system that is bad for us. But at some point, we need to find our peace with it all. And at some point, we need to find the grace somewhere, to see something good, something of gift and of value.

So it is with Joseph and his family. God keeps at it with them despite huge disappointments. There is grace and promise even at points when it's hard to see any. Family is a gift, as spoiled as the gift can get at times. It is worth the investment, as limited as the returns on the investment may be. To love our families is a gift of love we choose to give. And when the family is so dysfunctional, the grace must be even greater. God's love must reach into some really dark and painful places in order to find a way. What about our love? How committed are we to finding a way to love creatively in our families? How committed are we to recognizing and living the grace?

2) And this brings us to our second point. The way to love creatively in our families, the way to recognizing and living the grace, is a journey. What needs to happen on the journey? Let's ponder Joseph's journey for some revelation. Joseph starts off as a young boy being the centre of his world. But he is betrayed and rejected. He must learn some tough life lessons. He must also learn how to care about others beyond himself. Finally, he must learn how to heal and find reconciliation with his family.

The story begins with Joseph at 17 years old. He is the youngest, he is spoiled and treated as the favourite of his father. All his brothers know it. Joseph is also self-absorbed. His world revolves around himself. He is totally ignorant of how his actions and what he says affect those around him. He gives bad reports of his brothers to his father without thinking about how this will make them feel. Joseph is also arrogant. He has dreams about how he is as the youngest is destined to rule the rest. It's only a dream so it must be harmless, right? Even his father is upset by Joseph's thoughtlessness and insensitivity telling his dreams openly as if this wouldn't have a negative impact on the family relationships. The distance between Joseph and his brothers only widens.

And all this sets up what happens next. Jacob has vast lands. The brothers are farming the land and managing the herds. Joseph as the youngest is given the job of taking food and supplies to them and checking on whether they need anything. At one point in the story, Joseph comes upon them at a distant place. The brothers are all dealing with their upset at Joseph in different ways. One group are so angry with him, they want to kill him. The oldest wants to protect him even though he's upset with him too. A middle brother wants to spare him but have him taken away by traders. That's what ends up happening in the end. Joseph ends up in Egypt, a servant in the household of a government official. The brothers tell their father Jacob Joseph has been killed by some wild animal. He will be sad, but he'll get over it

they say among themselves. At least they won't have Joseph around to upset them any more.

Through many twists and turns, Joseph grows up. He experiences what it's like to be vulnerable, mistreated and betrayed. He also learns what it means to think beyond himself to the welfare and well-being of others. Through his innate abilities and a faith in God's purpose for him, Joseph not only survives, but becomes a great success. He becomes so successful and trusted, in fact, that he is made a top official in the Egyptian government. He helps the government plan ahead for years when drought may come and decimate the crops. He organizes the storage of excess crops in good growing years for those years when crops may fail and people go hungry. So much food is collected and stored, in fact, that peoples from other parts of the world come to Egypt to buy food.

And this brings us to the last part of the story. There is drought all over the land. Jacob and his sons must figure out how to survive. They have money but no food. They hear about the wise planning that has taken place in Egypt and how there is food there to be bought. Jacob sends his sons. I won't get into the details of the story, suffice it to say that the brothers come several times over several years to buy food. Even when they see this great official standing before them who is their brother they don't recognize him. He looks so different and goes by a different name. Years have come and gone. But Joseph is a different story. He not only recognizes them. He feels deep pain. But his pain is not anger. It is grief and sadness.

We read: "And Joseph wept so loudly that the Egyptians heard it and the household of Pharaoh heard it." Even though Joseph has made such a success of himself after so much adversity, and even though he has so much wealth, power and favour, he feels a vast emptiness. Something is unfinished, incomplete, absent, lacking.

Once his brothers recognize him, though, they are terrified. What will Joseph do to them? But this is what Joseph tells them: "Do not be distressed, or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life." Joseph has found his purpose. But his purpose now has to include his family. He will think of their welfare. Beyond his own hurt and sense of betrayal, healing must involve reconciliation for a greater good. From being a self-absorbed young man, Joseph has become a caring human being able to see goodness and value in the welfare of others. He is also able to see the grace in his family past his personal hurt.

3) And this brings me to the last point, and a point which brings out a key element in Joseph's journey. In order to move to a place where we see the gift of love that our families

are, in order to move to the grace of it all in spite of failings and limitations, there is something that must happen in us. There is a vast difference between carrying anger and carrying grief. God, we're told in scripture, carries anger for a moment, but mercy and grace for the long haul. God, we're told, moves through hurt and disappointment past anger and judgement into grief. In our gospel reading Jesus voices it: "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing!" These are not words of anger and judgement, but of grief. The difference between anger that's held and anger that turns to grief is an openness to love, to healing, even to reconciliation with others and with life. God will find a way in Jesus to open a door to healing and reconciliation even if so much damage has been done to the relationship over so long. God will not give up trying to find a way and make a way. Grief opens a way to love. Anger does not. It just stays there and keeps us stuck in resentment, blame and bitterness.

So it is with Joseph, and so are we called to do in our family relationships. How do we find an opening in us to change our anger into grief? And how do we find the inspiration to turn our grief into constructive love that reaches out creatively, again and again? How do we come to accept what cannot be changed, change what can and should be changed and the wisdom to discern the difference? How do we learn to speak truthfully but also adjust our expectations, finding the grace of what is as it is in our families?

Joseph finds a way as God has worked in him over many years and many life experiences. The God Jesus reveals and embodies seeks a way with Israel and with all people. How are we going to find new ways to engage our families and especially those places of pain, discord, brokenness and disappointment?

Let us pray: Shine your light on us, O God... Thank you for all you have given us through our families... Inspire us to find the grace beyond disappointment, peace beyond inadequacy and comfort beyond pain... Amen.