

Family Reunion

Genesis 45:1-15, 25-28

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, (Oct. 3) 2021

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In families, there are no crimes beyond forgiving.

- Pat Conroy

We were out of town last week for a family wedding and of course, we'll have another family wedding in a month here in Nacogdoches. Family weddings, funerals, and various other kinds of get-togethers are reminders that all kinds of people make up extended families.

I grew up going to family reunions every year or two. All sorts of family members showed up. Though she never came to a reunion there was always conversation about my third cousin who "accidentally" ran over her husband in the driveway, two times, and collected the insurance and lived a life of luxury in Florida. My second cousin Floyd would drive up with a fake, plastic hand hanging from the closed trunk of his car so it looked like he had slammed the trunk door on someone.

We had interesting people and interesting times at those family gatherings. The food was good and plentiful. And we had wonderful stories told by my Uncle Mac. My cousins and I ran and played and sisters and brothers and cousins and aunts and uncles who had not seen each other in years were able to laugh and hug

and get re-acquainted. But the day would wear long, and there was always an argument or two. My grandfather and his brother-in-law would argue over anything and everything. The Church of Christ and the Baptists would end up arguing over the Bible and who was going to be in heaven. My uncles would get angry at my dad's too progressive ideas. One of the kids would get hit in the head with a baseball. Someone would make some biting remark about someone else, and we would remember why we would have family reunions only once a year.

Today in Genesis, here's a family reunion. And what a family this is. Joseph, by now, is the second most powerful man in Egypt and therefore, the second most powerful man in the entire Near East. Famine has struck the Near East and people and nations everywhere are suffering and starving – except in Egypt. Due to Joseph's planning and his ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Egypt has been stockpiling grain for several years so they might provide food for everyone else.

So here, near the end of the book of Genesis, is a family reunion. Joseph's brothers, who do not recognize him after so many years come to Egypt asking for food. Years before, young Joseph was the favorite of his father Jacob. Joseph was arrogant and liked to strut around in the finest of clothing, especially after his father gave him a coat of many colors, signifying that he was the favorite. To make matters worse, Joseph kept having dreams of his brothers bowing down to him and he kept telling his brothers about these dreams. So, the brothers hated Joseph and they plotted ways they could kill him. One day they talked their father into allowing Joseph to go with them on a business trip. As soon as possible, they pitched Joseph into a hole while they talked over their options. A caravan came by,

and they decided that they would sell young Joseph into slavery. Then they put goat's blood on the multi-colored coat and went home and told father Jacob that little brother had been killed by a wild animal.

Joseph became a slave in Egypt but as my friend Steve Shoemaker says, "Joseph was like a cat who always lands on his feet." It was not long that he became the head servant in the wealthy household of the Egyptian Potiphar. Now Joseph was not only shrewd (a family trait) but he was handsome, as well. To make a long story short, Joseph survived a close call with Mrs. Potiphar, went to prison again but soon became the manager of the prison. Eventually, he was able to interpret the troubled dreams of Pharaoh and Pharaoh named him his number two man in the empire.

This is where the brothers from long ago show up in our text today. Chapters 45-50 of Genesis are the culmination of a family story that can certainly stand up to anyone's family story. When you get a chance, go back and start at the beginning at Genesis chapter 12 and the call of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham too, is shrewd, dishonest, conniving, and at times cowardly and other times courageous. Often generous while other times selfish. But Abraham and Sarah keep trusting God and eventually in their old age they are given a son, Isaac.

Isaac eventually marries Rebecca, who gives birth to two twin boys, Esau, the first born, and Jacob, who was born clutching the heel of his older twin. Jacob is also shrewd, dishonest, and conniving and cheats his older brother out of his birthright and blessing. Esau is enraged and old Isaac is heartbroken. Jacob goes

into hiding and meets up with his distant Uncle Laban, who is even more of a con-man than Jacob. Jacob falls in love with Laban's daughter Rachel and commits to working for Uncle Laban for seven years in order to marry Rachel. Remember the old advice, never do business with someone in the family? Well, here is an example. After seven years of work, they have a big wedding, and lo, and behold, that night, Jacob discovers he has married older sister Leah. Jacob is angry! Laban says, "Oh, I'm sorry. I thought that you knew that in our culture we must have the older daughter marry first. You can still marry Rachel, but you must work for me another seven years." Which Jacob agreed to do, and he did eventually marry Rachel. The reason why Joseph was his father Jacob's favorite was because Joseph was the son of Rachel, and the other brothers were the sons of Leah.

So here at the end of Genesis, the family story reaches its conclusion. We are finally able to see what happens to this sordid family of shrewd gamblers, cheats, conniving businessmen, family feuds, risk-avoiders and risk-takers, who had astounding faith in God. Joseph is able to tell his long-lost brothers who he really is, reconciles with them and confesses that somehow or another God has been working throughout all of this to bring about good. God worked through it all so that some people would be saved and fed and have a decent place of shelter during this terrible famine. In chapter 50, Joseph says, "Even though you meant it for evil, God meant it for good."

This story is amazing and sounds like something cooked up for television soap operas. Why in the world would the Bible include such a story as this, about such a family as this? This family is a mess. This family seems to define the term,

“dysfunction.” This ancient story sounds so strange at first, then, before it is over, it starts to sound close to home, maybe too close to home for comfort. So we listen to this story, this story of Joseph and his brothers, but also this story of old great-grandfather and great-grandmother Abraham and Sarah, and grandfather Isaac, and old dad Jacob who could out cheat everyone but Uncle Laban. This old story from Genesis thus becomes for us a reunion, a family reunion in which we are joined across the ages with our long-lost family, the family we would just as soon forget, the human, all-too-human family.

And through it all, God. God doesn't appear in this story very much. Rarely does God appear on the scene to settle the squabbles or referee in the arguments or make it all turn out right. Doesn't have to. Back behind the scenes, in the shadows, there is God. This story from Genesis is the story of a family, of God's relentless determination to have a people. That's the promise which begins this story, God's promise to Joseph's ancestors, Abraham and Sarah, the promise to make of them a family whereby all the families of the world would be blessed.

I don't know where you are with your family today. I expect that, with the love and joy, there is probably a good deal of pain. There are past hurts and deceptions, a long history of disappointment and disagreement. That's the way it is in families; the way it has been since the beginning.

Our church is a family. And hopefully, next Sunday we will have a reunion. We will rejoin each other in person in worship. I'm reminding us that in Christ, we become part of a new family, the church. We are like these extended families full

of love and pain, grace and grumbling, close enough to one another that we can get abrasive, and we're with each other enough to know that we think differently, work differently, and see differently. We have high hopes that are often disappointed, and we sometimes truly hurt one another. Welcome to church. That's the way it is if we really care enough to be involved with one another.

The good news is that God meets us where we are, for that's the only way God will ever have us. And though we might not see God at work, does not mean God is not working. This story says God is working, working over the long haul. Sooner or later, God will have the last say on redeeming the lives of us, and our families. There is hope; we do not have to be bitter or in despair. God is at work in ways that are redemptive and life-giving, and God works in us, empowering us to be redemptive and life-giving – listening, learning, forgiving, and being forgiven. I love writer Pat Conroy's comment, "In families, there are no crimes beyond forgiving." And that is certainly true of the church family.

But for forgiveness to work, we have to name the crime, the hurt, the cause of despair. Maybe we need to name it to ourselves. Maybe we need to name it in therapy and counseling. And what is truly difficult, we need to name it to the other person involved, usually in person, sometimes by letter. And we need to be able to listen to one another as the hurts are named to us. This is tough stuff, but this is church. This is why we make promises in baptism, and we make promises in our marriage vows. And in all ways and all the time, we are to name the hurts and the failures to God. Speak to God of your anger, your hurt, and your need. That's a starting place. It is a place through which God brings about healing and hope.

And always, even though there has been great pain and lots of mistakes in our families, somehow or another, God is at work “in, with, and under these human actions” of ours. Did God cause it all to happen? No. But God does work through whatever happens to bring about his will of creating and redeeming a people. God takes whatever hurt and sin is given and redeems it somehow. God turns the crucifixion into the resurrection. God does bring about a new day!

Therefore, trust God. Don't give up! Don't let despair or anger or deep disappointment grind you down. God is at work.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.