

The Family of Jacob and The Goodness of God

What does the ideal family look like to you? Once upon a time it was a father who worked in an office or factory, a mother who kept home, several children and often a dog. The children were mostly polite to any adult, ate their vegetables and took out the garbage more or less when asked. They got together with extended family who lived close by.

Many of our families are a lot more complicated than that. Maybe only one parent, perhaps there are three. Most of the adults work full-time. And children may not stay in the same house every night of the week. Extended family could be on the other side of the world or are people we would not want to talk to.

Many of our societal ideas of what a family should look like, how various members should respond to each other, how people should behave, who is included, and who is not, are formed by the TV sitcoms of the 1950's and 1960's. Sitcoms such as "Leave it to Beaver," "Father Knows Best" and "The Brady Bunch." You may have seen them as they were in re-runs for decades afterwards and there have even been sequel movies.

Modern sitcoms do take a more realistic approach to family life.

Today our images of perfection come from influencers on various social media such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, Snapchat, Pinterest and Facebook. Modern commercial advertising fits into the realm of influencers, telling us what we should eat, what we should wear and how we should furnish our homes.

Whether it is the sitcoms of the 1950's and 1960's or the influencers on social media, we are all aware of these not-so-subtle standards that are imposed on our culture and society.

Consequently, most of us will be quite selective in what we tell others about our families, conforming as closely as possible to the idealized image. We omit the drunk brother, the crazy mother, the father who walked out, the uncle who hurt people and the cousin who robbed grandma. Every family has at least one of them. We will select what we tell about ourselves to more closely comply with these cultural norms.

Take heart! In all likelihood the family of Jacob that we meet in our reading from Genesis, the story of Joseph being sold by his brothers, will make you and your family look pretty close to ideal. The family of Jacob had their issues.

Jacob, the dad, favours his youngest son Joseph from his second wife; greatly favours the young man giving him extravagant clothes normally kept for the patriarch, clothes that were totally impractical for doing any manual labour such as looking after the sheep that his brothers had to do. This may explain partly why Joseph comes across as an insufferable brat at times.

When the first-born son is the one to take on the family name and responsibilities, this preferential treatment of the youngest is quite an insult to the older brothers.

It can be helpful to recall that Jacob had two wives, who each had a maid servant; and Jacob had children by all four women.

The other brothers seemed to be in conflict with each other most of the time, and one of the few things they could agree on was the Joseph needed to be taught a lesson but could not agree on how to implement it.

The brothers lie to their father, telling him that Joseph must have been eaten by wild animals as evidenced by the blood stained coat. Perhaps you recall that it was Jacob who deceived his blind father to get his blessing by putting on his brother's clothes and placing rabbit skin on his arm to make it feel like his brother. What goes around, comes around. Deception seems to run in the family. It is pretty messy.

Yet, as messy as all this is, God is in the middle of it. Not causing it ... but working with it, working despite it.

Joseph was given a dream, a vision of the future; a future where he has great power. Perhaps the seventeen-year-old Joseph is too excited to share what he has learned in the dream to know that discretion is the better path, and that sharing a dream that he does not understand could be foolish. Later he will learn to interpret dreams more accurately.

Joseph will learn when the time comes for him to invite his father and brothers to come and live in Egypt and share of the food that has been stockpiled, that the dream that he had as a teenager was about the Lord's provision for the people and Joseph's role as a servant to that community. Joseph was but a channel for God's actions.

Joseph may think that the story is about him but as was told by the narrator at the beginning of the passage, this is the story of the family of Jacob. (v2) It is a story of God's goodness and mercy. We will learn that Joseph not only survives but thrives "because God is with him" (v39:21-23)

Our text today ends with Joseph being hauled away to Egypt by traders, sold for the value of an ordinary male slave. Despite the hate, violence and evil, this is not the way that the story ends. God, through Joseph, will ensure the survival of the family of Jacob and the people of Israel.

Writing in war-torn Germany at Christmas of 1942, Dietrich Bonhoeffer confessed, "I believe that God can and will let good come out of everything, even the greatest evil I believe that even our mistakes and shortcomings are not in vain and that it is no more difficult for God to deal with them than with our supposedly good deeds."

Thanks be to God for the goodness God shows us, may our families – the ones we are born into, the ones we create and the friends that become family - be blessed by God. Amen.

Readings: Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28 ff