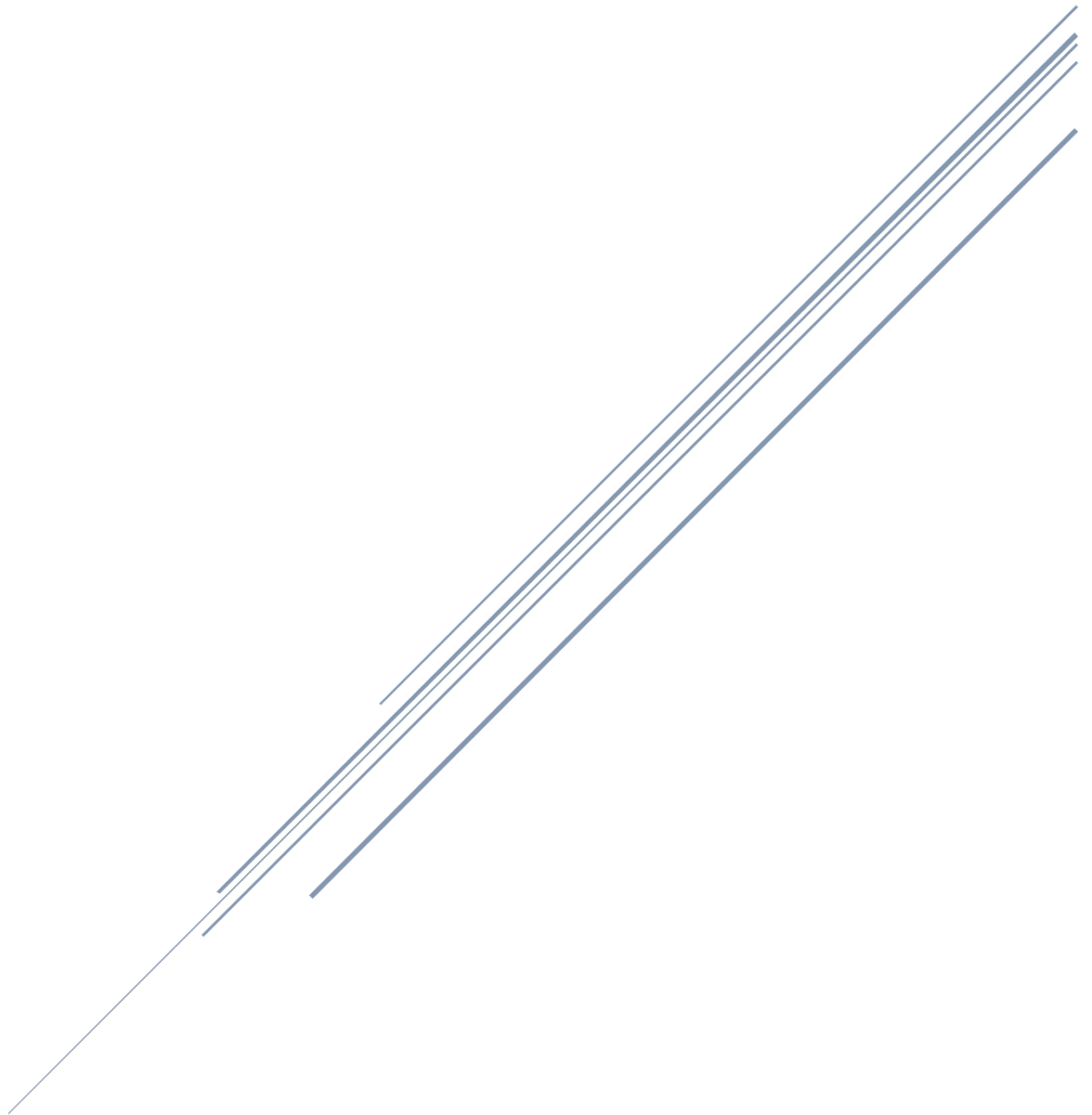


FAMILIES CAN BE THE PITS!

Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28



August 10, 2014

Families are complicated. Whatever happened to the days when you had a mom and a dad and a couple of kids – you know, maybe a boy and a girl – a dog and two cats in the yard...

It's a nice image isn't it? But according to this video, it doesn't sound like very many people actually get that kind of family. We like to look back on some romanticized glorified vision of the way families "used to be" or "should" be, but I think that somebody made all that stuff up. Somebody's feeding us a line because I don't know very many families that fit that description.

Today, in our culture, we are finally beginning to realize that families come in all shapes and sizes. Some families come with single moms and single dads. Some families come with two dads or two moms. Sometimes there's a biological mom and a step mom, and the dad. Or there's a biological father and a step-father, and the mom. Some families have no parents at all, and the kids are being raised by grandparents. There are foster families – that aren't biological at all, but are no less a family than any other family. There are rich families, and poor families. Families with homes and families who are homeless. There are families with special needs children and families that build little bungalows for the in-laws and grandparents, and they all live in a family compound.

at one point my family was spread out across the globe from Hawaii, where I lived, to Albuquerque where I had two brothers. My sister was still in NJ at the time, and my dad had been transferred for work, so my parents lived in England. But we were still family.

Regardless of all the different kinds of families, being part of a family is one of the most precious and valuable experiences we have as humans. Even people who have "no family" find that they really are a part of some kind family, don't they? Whether it's a church family, some co-workers, or a street gang, humans eventually must end up in some kind of family.

Joseph is no different. It almost feels like I knew Joseph and his brothers before I even knew God. When I was 12 or 13 years old, the church that I grew up in did a production of 'Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat' by the legendary Andrew Lloyd Weber and Tim Rice. That was before it became a huge Broadway hit starring – who remembers? – Donny Osmond! Donny Osmond played Joseph from 1992-98

Weber and Rice wrote a playful musical, and remarkably accurate, version of the story of Joseph -- a young man and favorite son of patriarch Jacob. Joseph sets off a huge drama that lasts all the way to the end of Genesis. Joseph's flaunting of his fancy coat and bragging about a couple of dreams he probably should have kept to himself sets off a family and geo-political drama that would change the history of the world.

After doing the play I always loved the story of Joseph. As the baby of the family myself, and favorite son, it was kind of a reverse Cinderella story to me. I too was destined for greatness. I too could one day be a prince or something, irresistible to the ladies. You know, we all go through periods when it's our dreams that keep us going. It's that special gift that mom or dad or that crazy uncle gave us that gives us the courage and perhaps the will to go on. I don't think it was any different for Joseph.

Returning to the story as an adult, I can see the story is not nearly as wonderful a fairy tale as I once thought. There are layers here that I could never have understood as a child. As an adult I have seen the good and the bad ways that sibling rivalries age. Family members grow apart, emotionally distant from one another. Rivalries sharpen into bitter arguments over the care of aging parents. Or soften into a deep appreciation for a sibling's unique gifts – it goes both ways.

In this story – in all of Genesis, in fact -- we can get a sense of the complications of Old Testament era parenting. You who are parents: you know how crazy it gets with sibling rivalry and who loves who the most... I can only imagine what it must've been like for Jacob having two wives and two concubines, and kids from all of them. Talk about sibling rivalry! I don't have kids of my own but I know parents are always concerned, praying to God, "Have I been a good parent? Have I given by best...or my worst?" ...Always asking God to bless the family and the children -- If God is even paying attention...

Interesting thing about this story: Where is God? Is God paying attention? Unlike many of the stories that come before and after, God is conspicuously missing from this story. It's one of the reasons scholars like to identify this story as the Joseph Novella, because it stands on its own, apart from the rest of Genesis. The story of Joseph is longer and more complete than that of any other patriarch -- or matriarch. While other stories seem to be a kind of collage of fragments, this is a complete work.

But where is God? God, who was the driving force in the lives of the men and women before and after Joseph. Abraham, Moses, even Joseph's own father Jacob would hardly make a move without God, but this story hardly mentions God at all. God, for some reason is hidden.

What isn't hidden – what is on full display is a family conflict of epic proportion. Joseph, second youngest son of Jacob, was born to Rachel, the wife Jacob loved. But Rachel died, leaving Joseph without a mom. Maybe Jacob was compensating for this by lavishing Joseph with love and making him his obvious favorite. This is embodied in the gift of an extravagant coat, with long sleeves that is generally worn by royalty.

Joseph wears this privilege proudly. Maybe because he was young, Joseph seems oblivious to the fact that his brothers hate him, and proceeds not only to flaunt his new coat, but goes ahead to share the dreams he's had; dreams in which the world and everything in it revolves around him – bows down to serve him in fact.

Our reading today has Joseph, sent by his father to check up on the brothers – Jacob, who seems equally oblivious to the family dynamics -- commands Joseph to go and report on the brothers. The brothers have had enough and they have a plan. And Joseph walks right into the trap laid by his brothers, but set out by Joseph himself and his own attitudes and actions.

At the last minute they spare him, they take his fancy coat – the thing that for them represents everything that's wrong with their lives - they throw him in a pit, eat lunch (!), and sell him to bunch of slave traders who happen to come by.

We are left with another cliffhanger this week. Next week we talk about how the Joseph story ultimately ends – eight chapters later. If you get a chance it's a pretty good read – check out the whole story Genesis 37 through Joseph's death in Chapter 50.

Now, usually, when people talk about his story of Joseph they focus on the dreams. The lectionary for some reason has us skip over verses 5-11, the verses about the dreams. We love dreams don't we? We talk about our dreams. We sing songs about dreams, and Martin Luther King Jr. declares in his prophetic sermon, "I have a Dream..."

But the dreams aren't what's important this week, apparently, so if it's not about the dreams, and God is hiding from us – and from Joseph -- what is it about?

Is it about Jacob? Who was never loved by his father and cons his own twin brother out the family fortune and blessing?

Maybe it's about the brothers? Born into a family where love is never distributed evenly, where parental approval is rare and the boasting of an arrogant and swaggering brother breed resentment and bitterness?

It's certainly about Joseph – a little brother who is loved too much (is there such a thing?) – a spoiled brat, and a snitch – whose inner sense of greatness is still just a dream?

It's about all of those things; but it's really about family. And it's about trust.

No one comes from a perfect family, and I don't know anyone with a family quite like Joseph's, but every family is weakened by the same things that weakened Joseph's: generational dysfunction – parents working out their unresolved issues through the lives of

their children; and love being distributed unevenly – even unfairly. Another thing that’s common to most families I know is that in the middle of family strife and struggle, it’s hard to tell if God is around or not – to know if God is even paying attention.

So who are you in this story? Are you Joseph in the pit, wondering why his brothers are treating him this way? I can almost hear him, “What’d I do?”

Maybe you’re one of the brothers, standing at the edge of the pit looking down, but stuck in a kind of pit of your own.

Or are you Jacob, who in the next verse is led to believe that his favorite son, the light of his life and hope for the future is dead.

Whoever you are, whatever the family situation you’re in, this story reminds us that silence and absence aren’t the same. Just because God isn’t speaking out loud in your family, doesn’t mean God isn’t there, in the midst of you.

We have to trust that God chose this family to be the bringers of God’s blessing, but not just for Jacob’s dysfunctional family, but for yours, and for the world.

In life, before we know God, we know our family. And even if being a part of our family can sometimes be the pits, maybe to know our family, with all its wounds and faults, is also the best way to know God.

Amen.