

# The Sins of the Parents and the Grace of God

Genesis 37:1-4; 12-28

Matthew 14:22-33

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Babcock Presbyterian Church

Sunday, August 13, 2017

Today's sermon title is suggested by a passage in the book of Exodus.

“The Lord... merciful and gracious is slow to anger... keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, yet by no means clearing the guilty, but visiting the iniquity of the parents upon the children and the children's children, the third and fourth generation.”

(Exodus 34:6 – 7)

These two verses assure us God stands ready to forgive when we repent. If we don't repent, our sins will have unintended consequences on our children and our children's children.

There were two brothers. One was a successful businessman, a loving husband and father and a respected leader in the community.

The other brother spent his life in and out of prison.

When one was asked to explain his wasted life, he answered, “What do you expect? My parents were both alcoholics.”

When the other was asked to explain the secret of his success, he answered, “What do you expect? My parents were alcoholics.”

One brother succumbed to his parent's sins, the other brother broke the cycle.

Last Sunday, the sermon was based on the story of Isaac and his two sons Esau and Jacob. Isaac favored Esau. His wife, Rebekah favored Jacob. As a result, Jacob and Esau became rivals.

Rebecca and Jacob conspired to steal Esau's birthright. When they were found out, Jacob ran for his life because Esau was out to kill him.

Obviously, Isaac and Rebekah were the dysfunctional parents of dysfunctional children. But even after Jacob wrestled with God and was forgiven by Esau, he wasn't entirely free from his parents' dysfunction and he passed it on to the next generation.

This is the next chapter of Jacob's story and how it poisoned his sons.....

After his reconciliation with Esau, Jacob (now Israel) settled in the land of Canaan. Israel had twelve sons but he loved Joseph more than the others. Being Daddy's favorite turned Joseph into a spoiled brat.

One day Israel singled out Joseph once to often. He gave Joseph an expensive long sleeved robe. This widened the rift between Joseph and his brothers.

Joseph made matters worse by arrogantly boasting about his dreams. He told his brothers he dreamed he and they were out in the fields bringing in the sheaves. He said, "Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf."

Hearing this, Joseph's brothers hated him even more.

Joseph had another dream, this time he shared it with his brothers and his father.

"Look, I had another dream: the sun, moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me."

Now even Israel was put out by Joseph's grandiose dream. He realized the eleven stars were his eleven brothers but the sun and the moon represented him and his wife, Leah.

"What kind of dream is this you had?" Israel demanded to know. "Shall I and your mother... bow to the ground before you too?"

Sometime later, Israel sent Joseph's brothers out to tend his flocks in a far away field. (Notice Israel didn't send Joseph out to work with them. Apparently, Joseph stayed behind to enjoy all the comforts of home.)

Israel sent Joseph out to find out how things were going. When his brothers saw Joseph in the distance, they grumbled, "Here comes the dreamer."

Straight away they started conspiring. They'd kill Joseph and throw his body in a pit. Fortunately, one of the brothers came to his senses. "Don't kill him, just thrown him into a pit for a while, that'll teach them a lesson." So, when Joseph came into the camp they stripped him of his long sleeved robe and threw him into the pit. Then they sat down to eat.

Out of the blue, they saw a caravan coming their way going towards Egypt. His brother Reuben suggested selling him to the highest bidder. Now they wouldn't have Joseph's blood on their hands. They'd soak his precious robe in goat's blood and tell their father their dear brother was devoured by a wild animal. Problem solved!

When Israel was told Joseph was dead, he was inconsolable. Did his eleven brothers feel even a tinge of guilt for what they did?

In the meantime, the slavers took Joseph to Egypt and sold him to Potiphar, one of the Pharaoh's officials. For the moment, Joseph's future looked bleak but as it turned out, "the Lord was with Joseph." (Genesis 38: 2)

Potiphar quickly realized Joseph was an intelligent young man with organizational skills. He made Joseph the overseer over his house. Joseph was still a slave but he was treated like a member of Potiphar's family.

We are told, "Joseph was handsome and good looking." Soon Potiphar's wife started flirting with him. Joseph refused her advances, saying he'd never betray his master. That didn't stop her from constantly harassing Joseph.

Then one morning, Joseph went into the house. She grabbed his garment and said, 'Lie with me.' Joseph broke loose and ran naked out the house. When her husband came home, she told Potiphar Joseph assaulted her. Enraged, Potiphar threw Joseph into prison.

What happened next was a repeat of what happened before. Like Potiphar, the warden of the jail, realized Joseph had organizational skills. Soon the prisoner was running the prison! We read, "The chief jailor paid no heed to anything in Joseph's care because the Lord was with him; whatever he did, the Lord made it prosper." (Genesis 39:)

By now we can see a recurring pattern in Joseph's story. Back home, Joseph was the favorite, the little prince who could do no wrong. Now the rich kid who had everything had nothing. He lost his freedom. He was a slave in Egypt.

But for Joseph's sake, "the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house." (Genesis 39: 5)

After Joseph was sent to prison, "The Lord was (still) with Joseph and showed him steadfast love; he gave him favor in the sight of the chief jailor." (Genesis 39: 21)

In the movie, All About Eve, knowing a cat fight was about to break out at a party, Betty Davis' character, Margo Channing glared at the other guests and said, "Fasten your seatbelts, we're in for a bumpy night."

Joseph's life was one bumpy night after the other. One minutes he's up, the next he's down, then he's up again, because, "the Lord was with Joseph and he found favor in his sight."

Joseph's bumpy nights can be traced back to the iniquity and transgressions of his grandparents down through his parents and finally passed on to Joseph and his brothers.

Did Israel realize he damaged his sons? Probably not. Israel lived what he learned.

Don't we all live what we learn? No one ever grew up in a perfect family.

What saves us from this vicious cycle is found in that refrain running throughout Joseph's story:

“The Lord was (still) with Joseph and showed him his steadfast love.”

The Lord’s steadfast love was Joseph’s only saving grace. This is true of the other key players in the Bible.

God still loved and blessed King David, even after he had an affair with Bathsheba and sent her husband on a suicide mission to get rid of him.

God had steadfast love and blessed the people of Israel even when they turned to other gods.

God still loved and blessed the twelve disciples when they distanced themselves from Jesus and argued over who was the greatest in the kingdom of God just days before Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross.

Despite this pettiness, God still loved every one of them, not because they were good but because God is good.

Even so, they still had to live with the consequences of their aberrant actions. God didn’t save them from that. For their own good, they had to go through the winnowing fire before they could repent and make amends.

But they never faced the consequences alone. God blessed and kept them under his protection and grace.

Does this mean we can glory in our dysfunctions? No way. That would be a sham gospel of the cheapest grace.

The brother who tried to justify for his wasted life with the excuse, “What do you expect? My parents were alcoholics,” took the coward’s way out.

The better answer came from the other brother. He worked hard to break free from his unfortunate childhood. By the grace of God, (how else can you explain his transformation?) and the will to change, his life was turned around. He was healed and recreated, and this is the key, he submitted to the God’s will.

He found favor with God and God empowered him to be a blessing to his family and his neighbors.

Joseph was certainly a victim of his brothers’ crime, but he wasn’t totally innocent. His arrogance and disdain for others set the stage for his downfall. And yet when he was stripped of everything, he was wise enough to seek God’s forgiveness and favor and then make the best of the mess he found himself in.

As we shall see next Sunday, by the grace of God, it was Joseph who broke the cycle of generational dysfunction set by Isaac, passed down to Israel and finally to Joseph and his brothers.

In today's New Testament lesson, we heard the story of Jesus inviting Peter to walk with him on the water. As long as Peter focused his attention on Jesus he was able to walk across the waters. When he let the stormy night, with the terrible winds and waves distract him, that's when he sank and called out, "Lord save me!"

Keeping his attention on God, not allowing his awful circumstances overwhelm him, kept Joseph on an even keel. As someone once said, "When God's all you've got, God's all you need."

This may be the end of today's sermon, but it's not the end of our story. I hope you come back next Sunday to hear the rest of the story and its God inspired implications on you and me, our congregation and the world we live in.

God isn't done with us yet. Praise the Lord! Amen.