

“Learning from Biblical Families”
Genesis 50:15–21; Matthew 18:21–35
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Families are wonderful things, gifts from God, places of love and acceptance... and yet they are also terrible burdens, sources of pain, hornet nests of conflict and intrigue. I don't mean that some families are one and some the other, though our immediate families may be, but our extended families are all a mixture of all the above. It's why our excitement is tempered with dread as we approach any large family gathering when *he* will be there or *she* will drink too much or...

I don't have to lean on professional experience to make this claim. I just need my own family in which I have always had people who love me yet also parents who divorced before my first birthday; an aunt with schizophrenia who held a butcher's knife at my throat one Thanksgiving upon discovering we were going to have her committed again, and rightly so; members of the Ku Klux Klan; an uncle who might have been in the mafia; several dear souls with addiction issues; and this is just my family, I haven't even gotten to Dana's family! Of course, most of my extended family thinks I am the odd bird. It is all a matter of perspective.

But there are no perfect families, just as there are no perfect people. We might think we can find something close to perfect or at least better in scripture, but biblical families are a mixed bag just like ours. One of the sons in the first family killed the other. The Patriarchs are faithful to their multiple wives and slave girls; King David, not so much. There are brothers who bicker all their lives, sisters forced to marry the same man, behaviors so sordid that I cannot even mention them here, with all ages present. And yet, in a strange way, all of this is good news.

In their book *Flawed Families of the Bible* David and Diana Garland put it this way (p. 13).

The stories of families in the Bible are raw and uncensored, bitter reminders of how awful family life can become. Though the ancient families in the Bible lived in a distant time, in a far-off place, with social customs and rules that sometimes mystify us, when we peel back the surface differences, we discover that people and their family problems seem not to have changed much at all. Once we begin to understand them, their stories and experiences

may seem to mirror our own lives. We can see reflections of ourselves in their messy and troubled escapades.

Indeed, we can, and as a result, we can learn from these stories.

Consider our reading from Genesis. This is part of what Old Testament Scholars call “the Joseph novella” (chapters 37, 39–50). It is a closing scene which presents a story of reconciliation, and perhaps forgiveness, which is why the lectionary editors picked this text from the Hebrew canon to go with the reading from Matthew. It is a happy ending, but it contains hints that things have not always been happy.

As we recall, it began with a bit of parental favoritism by Jacob. We might have thought that if anyone would have known better, he would have, given his father Isaac’s fondness for his brother Esau, his mother Rebekah’s love for him, and all the conflict that ensued. But family pathologies are often passed along, lending credence to the biblical claim that the guilt of the father’s sins is visited upon the children of the third and fourth generation (Ex. 20; Deut. 5).

Jacob favored Joseph and one day gave him a special coat. So, we might think this was all Jacob’s fault, but Joseph also had dreams about his brothers bowing down to him and told them about them. So, it should have surprised no one that there was conflict. Of course, the brothers didn’t have to go as far as they did, first considering the possibility of throwing Joseph into a pit and leaving him to die, then selling him to traders and giving their father the impression he had died. The brothers’ jealousy and anger were understandable, and Joseph wasn’t entirely innocent, but what happened was reprehensible, almost unforgiveable.

As we know, Joseph ended up in Egypt where he rose to power after facing life-threatening challenges. After the passage of time, a famine struck back home and the brothers ended up going to Egypt seeking help, which Joseph made available without letting them know who he was. He toyed with them for a while, tested them, but eventually disclosed his identity, weeping openly. He even met his father, but as we join the story today, Jacob has died.

They all feel grief, but what Joseph’s brothers are focused on is the fear that since Jacob is now gone, Joseph may feel free to take out his vengeance on them. So, they say Jacob left instructions for Joseph to forgive them, though there is no evidence that he did, and they refer to themselves as servants of the God of their father. They are laying it on thick, though we can’t really blame them, and it works. Joseph is moved to tears again and tells them not to fear, he will take care of them.

But before getting to the last part of this, it is worth noting what a muddled mess this family is. I am reminded of the words of U.S. Marshall Samuel Gerard in “The Fugitive” after he viewed a train wreck in which prisoners escaped, “My, my, my, what a mess.” This is Joseph’s family — parental favoritism, sibling rivalry, harmful actions and words, manipulation and division — and it is our family. It’s not the whole story, but it’s part of it. In fact, it’s also part of the family we call church.

In the reading from Matthew, Peter asks how many times he must forgive when a sister or brother, a fellow church member, sins against him. The reality of brokenness and thus the need for reconciliation exist in all human relationships. We may not be thrilled about this, and it is certainly not the ideal, but it helps to know we are normal, like biblical families, not completely lost. And perhaps seeing the flaws in others and the patterns of dysfunction can give us insight into ours.

Yet there is more here than the normalizing of messiness. There is also hope. Families at their best give us many good things — stability, acceptance, love. Furthermore, God works through the broken places in our lives, extending grace and creating room for healing.

Franciscan Richard Rohr has told a story about Navaho rug weaving (*Salt of the Earth* 15, 1995, p. 18). The rugs are beautifully handcrafted and perfectly structured with one exception. One corner of each rug has an obvious flaw. When asked about the out-of-place thread, the artists say, “This is where the spirit moves in and out.” So it often seems in scripture. God moves most freely, or perhaps we allow God to move most freely, in the most flawed and deeply wounded places of our lives, allowing us to experience grace and healing.

Joseph is moved to tears in our text. He doesn’t explicitly say he forgives his brothers, but he says they have no reason to worry, he will take care of them and their children, which is better than saying, “I forgive you.” One can speak the words but not mean them and thus still act in anger. It’s why Jesus talks about forgiving from the heart.

But how does Joseph do this, given how deeply his brothers have hurt him? He says that even though they intended harm, God intended good, which doesn’t mean God sent him into slavery, but that God used these circumstances to help Joseph acquire a position with which he could help his people. And now, God’s Spirit, working within him, makes reconciliation with his brothers possible.

To be clear, reconciliation requires more than forgiveness, an acknowledgement of wrongdoing and a willingness to change, what we call

repentance on the part of the brothers and perhaps Joseph too, but this is all possible; with God's help, it is all possible.

But we resist it. I remember receiving a technical foul during a church league basketball game when I was in High School. An opposing player had held, elbowed, and pushed me the entire game. So, I finally responded in kind. When the coach took me out to calm me down, my youth minister said, "You know Jesus said to forgive seventy-seven times," to which I replied. "Yes, but I had done that already, this was offense number seventy-eight, he had it coming!"

It was just a game, but we are hurt in far more significant ways, sometimes repeatedly, by family members, people we thought were friends, fellow church members. Yet Jesus isn't giving us an exact number to limit our forgiveness, he is saying there is no limit. It may seem unreasonable, crazy even, but such is the nature of God's forgiveness of us, as Jesus' parable in Matthew 18 makes clear; so, such is our calling, and there are people who have embraced it.

In *The Book of Forgiving* Desmond Tutu included a story about a couple who wanted to meet the woman convicted of killing their daughters in a car accident after she was released from prison. They didn't know why, they didn't plan on forgiving her. She wasn't even supposed to see them. Special permission was required from the parole board. But when they walked into the room, the mother broke down and cried, and then hugged the woman, saying she finally felt relief.

There was no sugarcoating what happened, the woman took full responsibility, saying she pled guilty because she was guilty. Nothing could bring back the daughters, but now the parents no longer held on to anger and hatred along with their grief.

Such is the nature of forgiveness, God's gracious intervention into the brokenness of our lives. If God can bring about healing in a family like this, in a family like Joseph's, God can bring about healing for us.