

“Family Values”

Genesis 45:3-11, 15; Luke 6:27-38

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Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Family values. It’s a “thing.” It’s an expression. But what, exactly, does it mean? And why is it important?

Not too far from here, a restaurant incorporates the name “family.” It seems popular; I see many cars there most days. In fact, I thought about stopping there for dinner at 5:15 last Thursday. There was no room in the parking lot. Clearly, they’ve got something appealing going on.

But “family” is a potent term. What does it conjure up for you?

For Chaplain Carl F. Burke, Chaplain of Erie County Jail, Buffalo, New York it conjures up this question in his book *God Is For Real, Man*. He writes: *“What does the servant of Jesus Christ do when all the forms of his [or her] middle-class society and family relationship, and even the meaning of words, are stripped from him [or her]?”* The question was planted when a young man at a church camp asked Chaplain Burke, *“Mister, what’s God like?”* Burke wrote: *“The answer to the seemingly simple question came without the slightest hesitation, and with the authority of a theological education plus several years experience as a pastor, and above all, with the confidence that was expected of an ‘adult leader.’ ‘God,’ was the answer, ‘is like a father.’”*

The reply from the boy came slowly.... ‘Hah,’ he said with much venom, ‘if he’s like my father I sure would hate him.’ Burke continued: *“Try this one. An eight-year-old girl, abandoned on the streets of a large city, asks, ‘If God love me like you say he does, why did he let Mommy and Daddy go away on me?’ If you try to answer this, remember that you are speaking to an eight-year-old who has never experienced parental love—a girl who has known little of family relationships except that she is not really a child—she is an intrusion.”*

As I said, “family” is a potent term.

All of this brings us to the story of Joseph and his eleven brothers from Genesis. Today’s reading brings us to the “happy ending” of the story. But it doesn’t start well. It starts in chapter 37 and runs up today’s reading, and is every bit as good as any drama you want to watch.

The story begins telling us that Joseph, the youngest of 12 sons, was 17 years old. No disrespect to any of our younger folks, esp. Matt Shupenis who's running A.V. today and excelling in basketball and life. But there's an old saying: *"When I was 17 I couldn't believe how ignorant the old man was, and when I was 21 I couldn't believe how much the old man wised up in four years."*

Meanwhile, Joseph's father Jacob *"...loved Joseph more than any other of his children...."* (37:3) Parents, take note of the mischief such favoritism caused. Jacob showed his favoritism shamelessly, providing Joseph with—depending on your translation—a *"coat with many colors"* or *"a robe with long sleeves."* The Bible doesn't pull any punches: Joseph's brothers *"hated"* him for this, and even more when he told them of his two dreams (remember, he's 17): the first in which his brothers' sheaves of wheat bowed down to his; and the second in which the sun, the moon and eleven stars bowed down to him (37:5-11) By the way, the sun and the moon: that was Mom and Dad, along with the stars who were his eleven brothers.

It gets uglier. His brothers conspired to kill him and they strip him of his coat; but his brother Reuben, the eldest, intercedes to have Joseph thrown into a pit instead. While Reuben was elsewhere, Joseph's brother Judah said, *"Let's sell this dude"* to a caravan of Ishmaelites heading to Egypt. After they pocketed the cash, Reuben shows up and, as the eldest, knows he'll be held responsible. So they kill a goat, paint the robe with blood, take it to their father and ask *"Is this your son's coat?"* Jacob is inconsolable, as any parent who has lost a child knows.

Meanwhile Joseph is sold into slavery, wins the favor of his master, is framed for sexual impropriety by his master's wife, and is put into prison. There he interprets dreams to the Pharaoh's former butler and baker. Both dreams are fulfilled as Joseph interpreted them: the butler is restored to his place in Pharaoh's court, while the baker is hanged. Joseph had said to the butler *"remember me to Pharaoh when it is well with you"* but the butler forgot and Joseph stayed two more years in prison.

Then Pharaoh has two dreams that no one in the realm can interpret. Seven thin cows devour fat cows and seven thin ears of grain devour seven plump ears of grain. Pharaoh is rattled, searches the realm high and low

for someone to interpret the dreams, and **now** the butler says, “*Yeah, yeah, ya know, I know a guy....*”

So they bring Joseph out of the dungeon, clean him up and present him to Pharaoh. Pharaoh says, “*I’ve heard it said of you that when you hear a dream you can interpret it.*” (41:15). And clearly something has changed for Joseph, who a few years before was talking about others bowing to him. He replies to Pharaoh: “*It is not me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer.*” (41:16) Joseph interprets the two dreams as one: seven years of plenty will be followed by seven years of famine. He proposes that Pharaoh appoint someone to manage resources in the good times so as to have reserve in the bad times, and Pharaoh says, “*You’re him!*” “*Joseph was 30 years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh.* (41:46)

After that there is more intrigue when the famine hits the land of Canaan and Joseph’s brothers come to Egypt to buy grain. They don’t recognize him but he recognizes them. Let’s leave it there: you can read Chapter 44 if you’re interested enough. Bottom line: after all that Joseph’s family did to him here’s what he says to them “*Now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life...so it was not you who sent me here, but God....*” (45:5, 8)

All of this gives me pause as we talk about our “church family” or being a “family-sized congregation.” Heck, we even have a “Family Nurture and Hospitality” committee, so ingrained this metaphor is within us.

So what does “family values” mean when a family like Joseph’s, and perhaps families we know, is so dysfunctional? Joseph gives us some clues that, as Christians, also point us to Jesus.

First, Joseph looks for the hand of God in his turmoil. When are families are struggling, where can we see the action of God despite the outward and inward struggle? Because the struggle is real. The truth is, as Chaplain Burke says in his book title, that “God Is for Real.”

Second, Joseph hangs in there. The Bible tells us that Joseph was 17 when he started bragging to his brothers and 30 when he became Pharaoh’s #2 man. All of those 13 years weren’t in prison, but many of them have suffering. Some how Joseph hangs in, and the implication from his response to Pharaoh (“*It is not me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer*”) implies that he learned it wasn’t all about him.

Third, Joseph uses his own agency, despite the treatment he received from his family. Joseph discovered a gift, in this case the interpretation of dreams. He uses that gift mostly for good, though as we learned not all dreams bode well. The point here is that there were things within Joseph's control, and he focused on them even when circumstances went against him.

Fourth, Joseph breaks the cycle of revenge. He was the #2 man in Egypt. He could have done anything he wanted to his jealous, mercenary, scheming, blood-thirsty brothers. Instead, he chooses reconciliation. He chooses redemption. He chooses love. As much as he, or we, go through at the hands of others, these are always choices.

So family values are faith, persistence, courage and love. All of which anticipate Jesus' own struggle with **his** family. When the crowd pointed out that his mother and brothers were looking for him, and his family thought he was crazy (Mark 3:31-35), Jesus looked around and said "*Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*"

And what is the will of God, the yearning of God, God's plan? Here's the thing about following Jesus: if it was easy, everyone would do it. Because here's what he says to us today:

Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you....do unto others as you would have them do unto you...If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them....love your enemies [and] do good....be merciful, just as your Father is merciful....do not judge and you will not be judged...forgive, and you will be forgiven. (Luke 6:25-37, adapted)

At the outset I told you about Chaplain Burke and the challenge he faced using "family" with kids who grew up on the street. But what I didn't tell you was what his book was about. Chaplain Burke had those kids put Bible stories in their own words. If we think about Joseph and his brothers being "lost"—lost to their true selves, lost to their family, lost in spirit—only to be found by Joseph's wisdom in saying "*It is not me, it is God,*" then perhaps the best story to close with is Burke's juvenile offender's paraphrase of the parable of the lost sheep. You know, the one where the

shepherd leaves the 99 and searches and finds the one that's lost? Here's how one of Chaplain Burke's young people tells it:

There was a used car lot at the corner of Main and Filmore. The owner had 100 heaps on it. If one of the heaps was snitched would the owner go and look for it? You bet he would. He would never give up looking for it until he found it.

Suppose he found it at North and Main. What would he do? Well, he would "rev it up, man" to see if it's OK. When he gets it back to the yard he would show it to the gang to have it checked out. If it checks out OK they would all be happy, 'cause that one heap is just as important as the 99 that no one stole. Well, this is the way it will be when the guy goes straight. One guy is just as important to God as 99 who have always been OK. This is for real—God is just as interested in you as the used-car lot owner is in his heap.

And if ***that's*** what we mean by "family values" and the family of God, I'm in. How about you?