

SEQUOYAH HILLS PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“Families Are Tough: History Rhyming”

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Genesis 47:28-48:16

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We’re near the end of our “Families Are Tough” series, looking at how the gospel might impact, comfort, and convict us even in familiar patterns of household dysfunction. This could be immediate family, extended family, surrogate family, you name it. We’ve been doing so through the lens of the story of Joseph in the Book of Genesis. Admittedly, we’ve missed a couple of weeks, so today will be a bit of catch up too to bring us up to speed, but first a few words on what’s coming up next.

In two weeks, we’ll welcome back as part of our Winter Speaker Series the Rev. Dr. Steve Eason, both to preach on Sunday morning and to keynote the speaker series at gatherings on Sunday evening and Monday evening. Many will remember Steve, who served as interim pastor here 7-8 years ago and someone for whom I am especially grateful to have as a good friend and mentor. But he will be kicking off a series for the season of Lent on the practice of prayer, after which we’ll walk through Christ’s longest prayer, a prayer he offers for us, at the Last Supper.

For today, however, we come back to the story of Joseph, now with his father Jacob and his brothers and all their households resettled in Egypt, and Jacob is nearing the end of his life. Let’s go to God’s Word together.

[Read passage, Genesis 47:28-48:16.] The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me?

Gracious God, we praise you in your forgiveness, for again and again your steadfastness meets us in our fickleness. Give us ears to hear this Word of grace, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

“I’ll make you a bet,” my Uncle Joe said, “I’ll bet that I can translate the rest of this story perfectly, and if I do, you give me an A for the class. If I don’t, then you can flunk me and never have to see me again.”

He had said that to his French professor, really probably more like a GA or something. See my Uncle Joe—technically he was a second cousin twice removed or something like that, but we just called him “uncle”—had been in a French class in college and really didn’t care for it or the GA or the whole premise of it to begin with. So when he would actually go to class, he would apparently be a bit of a problem for the GA who had been assigned to teach it. The tension was palpable.

He managed to hold on to a respectable “C” in the class, but he was also mindful of med school applications coming down the pike, so he was, let’s say, open to opportunities to up his grade.

The final exam for the class was a translation exercise. Once he started going through it, he started recognizing phrases, and even though he wasn’t that good at French, the gist of the story started coming through. And Uncle Joe had an epiphany. No, it wasn’t the Holy Spirit coming upon him in tongues, giving him the gift of foreign languages. It was a chance to up his grade.

So he goes to the GA, the one with whom he had had all this tension, and made that wager: a perfect translation for an A, or the satisfaction of flunking him. The GA agreed. They shook hands. It was sealed.

At that point, my Uncle Joe looked over the GA's desk and said, "This is 'The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County' by Mark Twain. My father used to read this to me nearly every night, and I have the story more or less memorized." Uncle Joe sat down, wrote out the translation, and got the A he was hoping for.

As it happens, the story of the jumping frog had been a dual-language publication by Twain, the story that first earned him some notoriety as an author. The story itself is a story within a story about a wager, ironically enough, put on a jumping frog, a bet that inevitably goes bad, but that's not why I bring it up.

Years later, in writing a bit of commentary, behind the scenes of the story coming together, Twain would confess that even after he had published it, he had become aware of a bit of unintentional plagiarism on his part. He learned that a strikingly similar story existed in an ancient Greek fable, and about the resemblance, he said:

"When I became convinced that the 'Jumping Frog' was a Greek story two or three thousand years old, I was sincerely happy, for apparently here was a most striking and satisfactory justification of a favorite theory of mine—to wit, that no occurrence is sole and solitary, but is merely a repetition of a thing which has happened before, and perhaps often."

Apparently, that note morphed over the years into one of those misattributed sayings that you never know who actually said it first, but long story short, this is its more common form: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes."

Have you ever heard that? You get the gist of it. Whether it's a jumping frog, or a story about a jumping frog, or an ancient Greek story about a jumping frog, or a story about someone translating a story about a jumping frog, patterns emerge, and even though it's never exactly the same, history can show some similar beats, or "rhymes" in it.

And no doubt, we can probably all think of "rhymes" within our own family histories. Maybe among the more amusing and common would be a grandparent noticing some personality traits in their grandchild—usually some kind of defiance—that bears a resemblance to traits in their own child, who's now a parent to that grandchild, and then notices some kind of divine justice in their child getting to enjoy raising themselves. Y'all have never seen that, have you?

It can be amusing, even tender, to be sure, but these patterns can also be harmful, and it's all in the family generational mix of things.

We see a bit of it at this point in Joseph's story. Stories within a story. History rhyming, in ways that are both tender and troubling.

A good bit has happened since the last time we were together. As I've shared, we're not going straight through Joseph's story but rather touching down at instances that point to an important family dynamic. Since the last time we were together, two big things have happened.

First, Joseph had made himself known to his brothers. (If you saw the short online devotional we put together two weeks ago, that's the episode it was talking about.) Joseph, after being betrayed and sold into slavery by his brothers—brothers who were jealous of their father's favoritism toward Joseph—reveals his identity many

years later to his brothers after he had risen in the land of Egypt to more or less govern the whole place, second only to Pharaoh. That was a big deal, gets things out in the open. There's chance for healing now, and there's some relief, but also some fear—his brothers are worried Joseph will still enact some retribution on them, but we'll get to that next week.

Second big thing to have happened was that their father Jacob, all his brothers, and all their households, relocated from Canaan down to Egypt. So here is a heartfelt reunion of father and son, Jacob and Joseph, after more than twenty years of Jacob believing his favorite son to be dead.

And Joseph hooks them up. He settles his whole family in the fertile land of Goshen in Egypt.

At this point, you might think, hey, that's a good resolution. Could this be the "And they lived happily ever after" part of the story? There's been enough hardship here. How about a happy ending? Well, kind of, but the story's not over.

Seventeen years pass, with them all together. And one day, Jacob, now coming near to his own death, calls Joseph to him, and asks him to promise to bury him not in Egypt but back in their homeland, in Canaan, to which Joseph swears.

Then a little later, Joseph goes back to his father and brings his two sons Manasseh and Ephraim. And here Jacob does something a bit odd. He adopts Joseph's sons as his own: "Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are."

Now what does that mean? Among other things, it means that Ephraim and Manasseh are considered in the same breath as Judah and Reuben, which is why when later you hear about the tribes of Israel, you don't hear about a "tribe of Joseph," but rather of two different tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh. It means Joseph's line would get a double portion of Jacob's favor. You know, typically in such things, we might imagine things divided equally among the children, but then for Joseph's two sons to be considered the same as Jacob's own sons, it means that for Joseph's line, he gets double, as opposed to a single share then divided between his two sons.

And then, something else strange happens. Jacob asks to bless Joseph's sons, and the text goes into great detail to describe what happens. Jacob's eyesight is failing, so Joseph makes it easy for him. He puts Manasseh, his older son, in front of Jacob's right hand, and Ephraim, his younger son, in front of Jacob's left hand, and those were the traditional places for older and younger sons, associations with right and left, all of that.

But, when frail old Jacob blesses his grandsons, he crosses over his hands as he puts his hands on their heads to bless them, putting his right hand on the head of the younger son Ephraim, effectively putting Ephraim ahead of Manasseh. (If you kept reading, you'd find Joseph ironically protesting this favoritism, but Jacob sticks by it.)

And as we're hearing it, on one hand, perhaps we're thinking, "Oh, that is so sweet and tender. This frail grandfather adopting his grandsons and blessing them, even prophesying about how God would bless them and multiply their households, all in the context of this father and son, deprived of decades together but now able to enjoy these twilight years together.

But also, as we're hearing of this grandfather give a double portion to one son, and even within that double portion, show favoritism to one son over another and going against what had been accepted tradition, we might

be thinking, “Jacob, have you learned nothing?” Remember what set off this whole sequence of events? Favoritism of one son over another. Now he’s again showing favoritism to Joseph by giving his line a double portion. Now maybe we might think that’s justified given all that Joseph’s brothers did and all that Joseph endured. But then, Jacob goes and does it again by showing favoritism of one of his grandsons over another, going against normal practice. Joseph’s sons are grown men themselves by this point. You think they won’t remember that? Jacob, have you learned nothing?

There can be something both tender and troubling in seeing family history rhyme through the generations. Like the Jumping Frog of Calaveras County, it’s a story within a story, and then a story told again and again, and then a story that gets told and translated as part of another story about another somebody’s Uncle Joe.

Do you see those patterns, those rhymes, in your own life, in your own family? Tales both tender and troubling. They can be as amusing as recognizing similar, maybe annoying personality traits in people a generation or two removed from each other. Or they can be as concerning as recognizing similar notes of tragedy playing out within generations of the same family, whether by genetic predisposition or subconscious conditioning or cold fate. But we see them. We can feel cursed by them, maybe, asking ourselves, “Have we learned nothing?”

And hopefully we learn something. Breaking destructive cycles, whatever they may be, is a part of how a family might grow, how we might grow within our family. The more we know of it, the more cognizant we are of the patterns and perhaps more able to recognize how we, even without realizing it, may be perpetuating or enabling something harmful, and then, to change course. We are not condemned just to repeat history.

So as we consider perhaps the more troubling side of family history rhyming, perhaps we might remember the words of blessing embedded in the cautionary parts of this story.

Fast forward centuries, and the tribes of Manasseh and Ephraim in their territories in the Promised Land, restored to the people of Israel after their journey back from Egypt, hold put together a larger share of the land than any other tribe, even Judah (that’s when you put them together). They also occupy some of the most fertile land in all of Israel, the farmland between the Jordan River and the sea, between just north of Jerusalem and just south of the Sea of Galilee. They cover the holy places of Shechem, where Abraham built an alter to God after God established his covenant with him and his descendants, and of Shiloh, where the ark of the covenant was kept for centuries.

But it was also much later known as the land of the Samaritans, a land engrained with prejudice, division, and conflict, both directed toward the inhabitants and coming from them.

And many years later, a itinerant carpenter, who grew up just north of this land in a little town of Nazareth, would tell a story of the surprising kindness of one his, well, brothers, a “Good Samaritan”, that runs counter to all expectations, and lifts it up as the example of neighborly love to which all who seek to follow and honor God might aspire—you may notice the “Love Your Neighbor” sign in the front yard.

In other words, fertile ground for grace. And our families are too.

Friends, no matter the rhymes you sense in your own story or the story of your family or the stories within the stories that feel told and retold and translated and reinterpreted in one generation or another, be assured that they are fertile ground for the grace of God.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.