

Genesis 37:1-11

Lent 4, Supplement Series A, March 26, 2017

Theme: God is gracious to troubled families

I. A father's favoritism II. A son's arrogance III. The brothers' jealousy
INJ Your family is not strange, even though you can think of a few details that seem out of the ordinary (more than a few?). Run through the list of sad or disastrous things your family knows: addiction, divorce, abuse, tragedy, scandal, pride, anger. None of us are untouched by them.

People say the family is beleaguered now more than ever, and it probably is. Yet families have always been breeding grounds for sinners to hurt each other with words and emotions and actions. The church family is also a place where our sinful natures do damage and cause pain. Even here!

What will happen to the next generation? Today we have the baptism of Eden Rudnik, and soon the baptism of Reagan Mecham. How will they manage among all the treacherous dangers in their church family and in their natural families? God does not leave us to stare hopelessly at our own deficiencies. In baptism our Savior washes away our sin. He made us part of his family by faith. Jesus teaches us to live our baptism daily in repentance for our own sin, and in the confidence of forgiveness.

Our God is gracious: not just gracious to imaginary people who "don't do anything wrong," or who "never have any troubles," but gracious to me and to you. As we look at Jacob's family today, what a mess it is! But God is gracious to troubled families. He is gracious to us.

Our lesson began: "This is the account about the development of the family of Jacob." You might expect stories of kindness and love as Jacob's family story unfolds on the pages of Scripture. Not even close! We are disappointed in everybody involved, aren't we? But, I want you to notice that God intervenes in the middle of our troubles and "develops" us by leading us to his words and promises. By leading us to see our own sins and his undeserved love for us, he shows grace to troubled families.

Jacob is not a perfect father. Perhaps we should backtrack and talk about how this family got to where it is. Jacob was a trickster who could talk himself out of any situation. While he spent time at his Uncle Laban's home, he fell in love with the younger daughter, Rachel. Laban was a trickster, too. When the wedding came, Jacob was surprised to find he had married the other daughter, Leah. After much deal making, Jacob married them both. If two wives isn't enough trouble, it went downhill from there. Rachel wasn't having children, so she gave her servant Bilhah as a substitute, and 2 children were born. Leah countered with her own servant Zilpah, and

2 more children. After 10 sons and a daughter, beloved Rachel had her first child: Joseph. At the tail end, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin.

Can you imagine the chaos in that household? Four wives and thirteen children and all the tension between rivals and how to divvy up power and money and possessions! We look into that family when Joseph is 17 years old. He is younger than the others. Picture Joseph as a high school senior while the brothers are out of college already; some are nearly 30.

Focus on Jacob first. He is the father of this brood, and he sets a poor example. Joseph – the firstborn of his beloved Rachel who had died – is his favorite child. I am sure there were many and continual ways his favoritism showed itself, but the poke in the eye was that special robe. Every time Joseph wore it, it was like rubbing his brothers' noses in the dirt. Some imagine this robe made of many colors. Perhaps it was. Maybe it was richly ornamented. No matter what it looked like, that wasn't the issue. That father displayed his favoritism this way, that was the problem.

So harmony in the family was disrupted. The brothers could hardly say a friendly word to Joseph. They hated him. It went beyond sarcasm and ribbing – they wanted to do harm to Joseph. Their eyes grew small and their heads got hot. Daddy kept things civil, but when he wasn't around ...

Why would God put this dysfunctional family before us? These people made up the church of the Old Testament! Their descendants are the Israelites! Why talk about their failings? I think one answer is that the Lord is gracious to troubled families. He showed his love to this group, even though they didn't deserve it. Just the way he shows love to us.

This motley band of hate-filled brothers were the ones to whom God gave the promise of a Savior. They would inherit the land. Their descendants would be the nation that served as an incubator for the Savior to come. Why did God choose them? Not because of their temperament or their spiritual maturity! Only by his grace. It was grace that gave them the promise of the Messiah. Grace that put them in the land. Grace that gathered them together and preserved them though all the troubles they brought on themselves. The Descendant God had promised would save all sinners, all those who are just like these brothers and their father.

God is gracious to us when, in our families, we are foolish and selfish and blind to the harm we are causing. By his word he exposes our guilt, and by that word also gives forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Even though we have many troubles in our families, God shows us undeserved love. He develops us by his law and his gospel so we are his dear children by faith. Our confidence is not in our attempted obedience, but only in his mercy.

Father Jacob was a big cause of the troubles in the family, but he

was not the only one! Just like for us, our problems are not only because someone else made mistakes or because circumstances were unfavorable. Sometimes, we add to the problems. Joseph stirred the troubled waters.

He gave a bad report about his brothers. We are left to imagine what kind of a report it was, but when the favorite son tattles, did he make it up? Did he twist the meaning? Was it an honest report that needed to be made? Whatever the case, the brothers hated Joseph all the more!

Then it got worse. Baby Joseph who doesn't even have to get his hands dirty doing work pranced in to announce he had a dream. In this dream the sheaves of grain all gather around Joseph's sheaf, which stood upright and had authority. Joseph is the king and all the brothers bow down before him! "Will you really have dominion over us?" they said. If it was possible, they hated him still more.

A second dream got father involved. The sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed down to Joseph! Was he rubbing it in? Did he taunt them with his superior insight? Jacob said: "What kind of dream is this that you have dreamed? Will I and your mother and your brothers really come and bow down to the ground in front of you?"

Joseph seems to have been an annoying young man! At least some of the strife in the family was at his instigation. We don't have to make excuses for his arrogance, though. His actions are so much like ours! Sin does consume us, and we do what is wrong, often. Why would God give us this example of a selfish young man? So we see that God is gracious to him, and to his troubled family. He is patient with us, "not wanting any to perish, but all to come to a knowledge of the truth."

As wrong as Joseph's actions were, God did give him those dreams. They were a foretelling of what would happen, as Genesis unveils. They were given, not because Joseph was better than anyone else, but because God is gracious. Hard times would come, but the Lord gave assurance that trouble does not mean God hates you. His love stands firm even when we are in great distress. He will fulfil his promise to "work all things for the good of those who love him." God showed grace to this troubled family! He will deliver us, too, using even suffering for our eternal good.

For Joseph, the turnaround was spectacular. For us, we may not see such a dramatic turn of events. Yet our God is gracious to us. We don't expect to receive dreams and direct intervention from God, but we have his inspired words and a Savior who lives to intercede for us. None of the awful and depraved things we do change what God has done for us by grace. He sent his Son to save. Paul said it in our Second Lesson: "There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." God is gracious to

troubled families, to us, even when we are arrogant!

What about when our weakness persists? When we are foolish so often? When the triggers happen day after day and we react without thinking? When our emotions are roiled and we get jealous? Even then, God is gracious to us. Check out the brothers' jealousy.

The older sons of Jacob, the ones who were responsible and hard working, who toiled day after day and never got thanked or recognized, they felt left out. Left out of the attention of their father. Left out of the attention of God! They didn't receive special dreams. They were supposed to bow down to Joseph? I think it is interesting that these ten brothers who had every reason to hate each other, ended up working together (even if it was to gang up on Joseph)! They are so much like us who devise plans to get what we don't have. Who lust after what God has not given us. Who complain and grumble about the way things are not fair. We think we have been left out. That we missed all the good things others have. And we show our sinfulness by the way we treat our family and our friends.

Are you ashamed? God is gracious to troubled families. He sent his only Son as the one who bore the curse of each of your sins. Jesus died to pay the price for your jealousy and pride and manipulation and anger. It is grace! You don't deserve it, and neither do I. Neither did any of the people in our lesson. Yet, you have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Your God has lavished his grace on you so that you also have abundant physical blessings! Food and clothing and shelter. Cars and phones and televisions and credit cards and travel plans and blessings you never think about! None of those do we deserve! Only by grace. You have not been left out, forgotten or even treated badly by the Lord. He is gracious.

In your troubled family, God's Word stands as a sure and solid foundation. It is the light shining in the dark places. Your Savior forgives all your sin. He takes you back to your baptism and assures you he has washed away the guilt. You are his own dear child. God is gracious to troubled families. To you in your family. To us, in our St. Luke's family. By grace!

We can't always see how our situation can be good for us. Joseph had a rocky time! He was abducted, sold, and made a slave. Yet God used it for good. Not just for Joseph but for his whole family. For the family of the coming Savior. For the benefit of the whole world, including you and me. We call it the Theology of the Cross. That even though we suffer, God is still gracious. He remains faithful always, and we will trust his words even when our eyes fail to see any good. Our families aren't strange, but they are filled with sin just like any other. What is amazing is that the Lord is gracious to troubled families. Overwhelmingly gracious to us! SDG Amen.