

Family Life
Genesis 45:3-11, 15

Family. How good is it to have family? I'd do anything for my family . . . I'd give my life for my family. And, that's how it's s'posed to be, isn't it? That's how we're conditioned . . . blood is thicker than water, and all that. The relationships within families shape us to be the people we are . . . families are where we are loved and nurtured and cared for.

Now, it used to be easier to define a family: it was a man and a woman and two and a half kids. These days it's a whole lot more complicated: a family might be a man and a man and a pet poodle, or a woman and a woman and their donor conceived children, or a 'single' person with a group of close friends he considers family. We call our church community a family. Now, we might debate the legitimacy of some of those definitions of family, but I think it shows each of us has an innate yearning to be part of a larger group . . . to have close relationships that are nurturing, protecting, and giving.

And, if only that's how it always was!

But, there's the jealousies, the conflict, the arguments, the rejections, the hurt, the infidelities, the breakdowns, the divorces, the estrangements . . . and, that's just my own extended family! You know about these things too, I'm sure . . . in your own families. Those things that are far from our ideal of what family should be, and yet, they are all so real in what our families *are*. Even our church family.

So, what is the reality? Is it the picture postcards of smiling, happy family we like to post on Facebook, or is it the mess of emotions and turmoil and conflict and pain we don't really like anyone else to see? Or, is that the wrong question? It's a bit like asking which side of a tapestry is real. Is it the side with the beautiful picture, lovingly crafted and presented, or is it the side with the mess of knots and threads that looks like a dog's breakfast? Both a real. You can't have one without the other, can you? So, in every family, there's good and bad. In every family there's peace and conflict. In every family there's joy and sorrow. It's all real. It's all part of being family. I haven't come across a perfect one yet . . . not even God's family!

And, really, as Christians, that's the question for us: where is God in all this?

It's tempting to believe we only find God in the picture postcard family snaps, in the good times, in the happy times, in the times of blessing. After all, that's how God meant families to be, isn't it. And, if God is perfect and holy, surely he's not going to have anything to do with the mess of sin and trouble we seem to bring on ourselves within our families. Surely he's just waiting for us to clean up our act, get ourselves together, so he can bless our relationships again?! In the meantime, God stays well away.

Well, I've got to tell you, if you think your family has problems, you should read the Bible! Or, maybe not! I'm not sure you'd want to follow the examples of families in the Bible. One of the most

dysfunctional families in the Bible was Joseph's. Joseph's story is a story of conflict, of favouritism, of jealousy and rivalry. Joseph lords it over his brothers with his famous coat of many colours; the brothers plot to do away with him, but eventually they sell him into slavery. He ends up a servant in the house of an Egyptian master where he's propositioned by his master's wife, thrown into jail, and eventually rises to be second in command to the Pharaoh.

And, now, Joseph is reunited with his brothers . . . and, it's Joseph who holds all the cards . . . he is able to look back at the ups and downs and twists and turns of his life and his family and see God at work in all of it! Not just now that he is successful and powerful, but in all of it. In the messiness of it all . . . in the conflict, in the favouritism, in the jealousy and rivalry . . . God was there . . . and, not just there, but active and working . . . working in spite of the human dramas and machinations . . . working to do what God does, that is, to give life, to nurture life, to create life, even and especially when everything seems to be leading away from life . . . where everything seems to negate life. Joseph's brothers thought he was dead, but here he was standing before them. That was God's work. Joseph had the power, the right even, to get revenge on how his brothers had treated him . . . Joseph could have continued the normal human cycle of tit for tat, but instead he seeks reconciliation . . . forgiveness . . . a new beginning. That is God's work.

And, that's how God has always worked: not far away and remote, waiting for people to get their act together. God has entered into the messiness of our world, of our lives, of our families and set to work healing and restoring and forgiving and changing and giving life. That's the story of God and the people of Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures . . . God never abandoned his people, no matter how messy things got, no matter how far they strayed. God was always at work, even when it didn't look like it. And, God was always at work in very human ways . . . in very ordinary ways. And, not just for the people of Israel, but finally, for all people in and through the person of Jesus. You'd hardly say Jesus had the perfect family, or the perfect relationships, even though traditional theology says that Jesus was perfect. He upset his parents, he argued with his elders, he caused people to hate him and eventually he was hung on a cross, deserted by his mates, crucified. If God wanted to stay out of trouble this was not the way to go about it.

But, God doesn't just want to stay out of trouble, God wants to be in the trouble of our lives . . . in the nitty gritty . . . in the mess . . . in the heartache and pain . . . because that's where we need God most. So, Jesus entered into our world and engaged with people . . . he healed, and touched and consoled and forgave and defended and changed and gave life . . . even when all looked lost . . . even when death had its say . . . even as he hung on the cross. But, the cross was not the end . . . even in and through Jesus death was God still at work in our world . . . Good Friday leads always to Easter. Through Jesus death always leads to life.

So, what's the reality for us and our relationships? The reality is sometimes we see the beautiful front side of the tapestry and sometimes we see the back, but God is present on both sides, always working to give life.

As he still does today . . . whatever you are experiencing . . . whatever mess your life might be in . . . whatever your family situation, God comes to you today . . . in the Word . . . in the bread and wine of Holy Communion . . . it may not look like much, but it is God's gift of assurance and forgiveness and strength in order that we could have life . . . life in all its fullness and complexity.

That doesn't mean we have to accept our lot . . . simply put up with the mess. God's presence might give us the courage to say: "Enough is enough!" It might give us the patience to deal with chronic pain. It might mean we find the will to go on in the face of crippling loneliness. Whatever the case, God continues to work in our lives, in ways that we may not understand, but in ways that always draw us closer . . . closer together in relationship with God. It may not be a perfect family, but it's always God's family.

Amen.

Pastor John Strelan
St John's Lutheran Church, Unley
Epiphany 7, 2025