

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

April 30, 2017

“Grandpa Jacob”

All in the Family, part #2

Genesis 48:8-20

This is a good day to be in God’s house. Turn to someone and say, “God wants to use you to bless someone.” Who doesn’t want to be a blessing to someone else, right? In order to be used by God, we join together and study God’s word. And for a few moments, that’s exactly what we are going to do.

Would you join me in prayer?

O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, you have shown your faithfulness throughout history, and even today you uphold us and bless us. You are our strength and our hope. You sent your Son Jesus into the world to fulfill your promises and save us from sin. You sent the Holy Spirit to call us and shape us, so that we could be true disciples. Grant us wisdom and insight now as we ponder your Word. Let your seeds of faith find fertile soil in our hearts. We ask this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

If you were here last week, you got to see a picture of my Grandma Falker. Today, I have another family member to introduce: my grandfather, Max Graybiel. Grandpa Graybiel was a dairy farmer in St. Claire County, and as you can see from the picture, he served as the county commissioner for several years. I have a lot of good stories about my grandfather. He had a great laugh, and big pot belly. My mom told me they used to dance the polka together, and Grandpa simply lifted her up against his belly so that her feet never touched the ground. Grandpa loved to play euchre and spent much of his life helping his family however he could.

My favorite memory of Max is the time he let me drive his car – a big, old, brown, two-door Suburban. The catch was, I was only fifteen and just beginning driver's education. Grandpa let me drive to McDonald's, exactly one mile away. What I remember most was that he trusted me and expected me to do just fine.

My grandfather's love was important in my life. As a child, the way I saw Max serve my mother and father had a profound impact on me. There are so many blessings I received – his humor, his respect for women (he had five daughters, no sons), and his love of games. Grandpa was the peacemaker in the family. Things were not always smooth, but we know that he loved us.

What about you? What kind of relationship did you have with your grandfather? Did you talk much? Do you remember anything he taught you? What impact did he leave on your family? This might be positive or negative. And even though I am using the past tense, perhaps the answers are still unfolding.

But I have another, deeper question for you. If you were on your deathbed, what would you want your grandchildren to know? What blessing would you leave them?

I hope that these questions make you think, because the story we are considering today is about Grandpa Jacob, on his deathbed, as he blessed two of his grandsons, the sons of Joseph. You might know a little about these men, but let me just share a few of the highlights of their stories.

Jacob was the son of Isaac and Rebecca, the grandson of Abraham. His name roughly translates to "cheater." His life was a struggle to earn success by any means possible. He cheated his older brother, Esau, out of his birthright, first by selling Esau some soup, and then by disguising himself and going to his father, Isaac, dressed as his big, hairy brother. When Esau wanted to kill Jacob, Jacob ran

away and lived with his uncle, who also cheated him, conniving to get Jacob to marry two of his daughters, Leah and Rachel. Believe me, Jacob's life was like a soap opera. At a pivotal moment, Jacob wrestled with God, and God gave him the name, "Israel," which basically means, "He struggles with God."

Jacob's sons inherited this dysfunction, and as a result of Jacob's doting, his youngest son, Joseph, was betrayed by his brothers, nearly killed, and sold into slavery in Egypt. Joseph, the son of the favorite wife, Rachel, went from a life of being favored to a life of hard knocks. He was a slave for Potiphar, then accosted by Potiphar's wife, falsely accused, and thrown in prison. But Joseph also persevered, and through his faithfulness, he was promoted to second in command by Pharaoh, and he forgave his brothers and saved his entire family from a severe famine.

If your head is spinning a little bit, it is because I have just summarized fifteen chapters of the Genesis in two paragraphs. But here is why you need to know this background: in our scripture today, Jacob has been reunited with Joseph, and it seems that they are making up for lost time.

So here is the scene. Jacob, now called Israel, knows that his time is up. He gives his final instructions to Joseph, making him promise that Joseph will bury Jacob in the land of their ancestors, Canaan, and not in Egypt. Then Jacob sends for Joseph and his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. It is time for the family tradition of the deathbed blessing.

Try to imagine, if you can, the thought of never seeing your son again, and then, by a miracle, not only seeing your son again, but also your two grandsons. It is a powerful, emotional moment, as Joseph takes his two children and places them on Grandpa's knees. I take a little liberty in my interpretation here, because

if you read Genesis literally, Ephraim and Manasseh would have already been in their twenties when they came before Jacob. But I imagine them about the age of my two boys, just old enough to understand what's going on, but young enough that they can still fit in Grandpa's lap.

This is where the story takes a startling turn. Joseph places his sons according to tradition. He puts the older son, Manasseh, on Jacob's right, and the younger, Ephraim, on Jacob's left. But as Jacob begins to bless his grandsons, he crosses his arms. Understand, the right hand was the superior position, the more favored hand, as in our modern expression, "You are my right-hand man." When Joseph saw what was happening, he tried to intervene. He probably thought, "Well, Grandpa's a little confused, so I'll help him out here."

But Jacob insisted - the younger will get the bigger blessing. It's ironic. Joseph was the younger son who ended up being the greatest in his family. And now he was trying to do the normal thing with his own boys. He should have known better. Jacob was part of a long line of people God has blessed "out of order." Maybe Joseph was concerned how sibling rivalry had impacted his life. Maybe he did not want to see his own boys fight over who was better.

But this is what God does. God surprises us, not by following tradition, but blessing those who are least likely. Jacob knew this. He had fought long and hard to receive God's blessing. He had journey through pain, anger, betrayal, and learned his lesson. Jacob had reconciled with his brother, Esau. He had seen his family brought safely through the famine to Egypt. In all the things Jacob experienced, he could have chosen to be bitter, but instead he chose to bless, and to do it God's way. I think it took Joseph a moment to accept all this.

May I ask, how does your life compare to Jacob's? Have you been challenged by separation, illness, death, and famine? Have you wrestled with your family and with God? No one is perfect, despite the best image we try to project. Jacob, the cheater, had had a rough life. But at the end, he chose to bless God and bless his children and grandchildren.

What do you do when you face trouble and worry? What is your reaction? Some of us, if we are honest, are embarrassed by our actions, and that includes myself. We speak rash, harsh words, and choose bitterness when we are disappointed...and I'm not talking about when your favorite teams loses a game. I'm talking about the struggle we all have, to try to live in peace with one another and to follow God. We all struggle.

But we have to realize, there are people watching us all the time, to see how we will react. What do your children see? Your grandchildren? Your neighbors, your students, anyone in the next generation? Do they see you curse, or do they see you bless?

Through Jacob, we see that God wants us to bless the next generation. God wants us to show them that they are strong. Show them that God has great things in store for them.

Jacob told his grandsons, "In your name will Israel pronounce this blessing: May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh." Could you put your own name in that sentence? "May God bless you and make you wise like Grandpa Joe. May God make you compassionate like Grandma Jane. May God bless you and make you honorable like Grandpa John."

God wants to bless those around us, and he wants to use us to do it. God wants to show them surprises, remind people that God is on the side of the least,

the last and the lost; people like widows and orphans and the down-and-out. Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven flips this world on its head. He said, “The first will be last, and the last will be first.” (Matthew 20:16). “Whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.” (Matthew 16:25) “Love your enemies.” (Matthew 5:44) God wants our words to reflect the values of the kingdom of heaven, not the kingdom of this world.

And there is another important lesson that Joseph teaches us: “Don’t get in the way of grandparents. They are always right!” OK, I’m kidding, a little. But what this story really teaches us is, “Don’t get in the way of God’s blessings for our children.” God spoke prophecy through Jacob, and Joseph almost intervened. Both tribes of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh, were blessed, but Ephraim became greater. That’s OK. Instead of battling for the blessing, Ephraim and Manasseh shared it. Think of the contrast with Jacob and Esau, who fought over their blessing. Think of the contrast of Joseph and his brothers, who tried to destroy him in anger of what Joseph was predicting God would do for him. Instead, these young grandsons, Ephraim and Manasseh, quietly accepted their blessings. They achieved what God had for them without cunning and deceit. They did not receive dysfunction and curses. They received blessing as an inheritance.

So what? First of all, we need to learn to choose our words wisely. James 3:9-10 says, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.” Our words can inspire the next generation. So let’s use them wisely.

Second, and most important in my opinion, our past does not have to dictate the legacy we leave behind, especially to our families. This is the beauty

of the grace of Jesus Christ. In my family, I have seen depression, anxiety, alcoholism, anger, apathy and bitterness. Some members of my extended family have chosen to cut themselves off from the rest. That is their choice, but not mine. I choose forgiveness, like Joseph did. I choose blessing, like Jacob did. I cannot control the actions of my children, but I will commit myself to doing the best that I can so that they will receive an inheritance of faith and blessing from me, so that my grandchildren will know that their grandfather lived to love God and serve others. And maybe, when I'm a grandpa, I will take my grandkids out for ice cream, and give an extra scoop to the youngest, just to see how the others react. And when they say, "That's not fair," I'll tell them the story of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and Joseph and Ephraim and Manasseh and Jesus Christ. No, life is not fair. Thank God for that. If life was fair, I would have never received grace when I did not deserve it. I would never have received God's blessings if I had had to earn them.

Talk to your grandchildren about these things. Tell them the great people that they will become after you are gone. Inspire them. Bless them. This life is the only chance we get to make an eternal impact. Let's use our words wisely. Let's bless their socks off.

Memory verse

1 Peter 3:9 – "Do not repay evil with evil or insult with insult. On the contrary, repay evil with blessing, because to this you were called so that you may inherit a blessing."

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever experienced sibling rivalry? Who fought whom, and why?

2. Have you ever thought your parents or grandparents favored one child unfairly? Why?
3. In what ways do our past experiences and struggles cause us to grow? In what ways do they embitter us?
4. Why does God show favor in unexpected ways? Do you think God is fair? Defend your answer.
5. What blessing can you give to others (especially your grandchildren)?