

# Family Trauma, Family Promise

7/30/2023

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Preaching on:  
Genesis 29:15–28

There are all kinds of different families, but one thing most families have in common is that they are a place of promise. For many of us family is all about relationships. It's about love. It's holidays and special events together. It's friendship, support, stability: the people you can count on. It's the next generation—kids. It's also grandparents, and great-grandparents, patriarchs and matriarchs—heritage. These are the aspirations, the promise of family, and we do our best to invest in this promise and we trust that we can rely on this promise in our time of need.

Jacob has a great aspiration for his family. As we heard last week, God visited Jacob in a dream and told him that his offspring would become as numerous as the dust of the earth and they would inherit a promised land. Jacob had been chosen—his family had been chosen—for a great promise. But, boy, what an inauspicious and traumatic way for that promised family to begin.

On the day that should have been a milestone in the keeping of that promise, on a day that should have been a day of celebration after years of hard work and devotion—Jacob and Rachel’s wedding day—there is a trick (the old switcheroo) which is really more than a trick, isn’t it? It’s an betrayal, an assault, a heartbreaking trauma. I mean really—put yourself in Jacob’s shoes, into Rachel’s, into Leah’s. A day of love and promise is transformed through alcohol and sex and deceit into a day of lasting trauma for this budding young family.

And that’s the dark side of the promise, the dark side of family. I’m not being overdramatic. Almost every family—yours and mine—has its secrets, its betrayals, its lies, its conflicts, estrangements, abuse, addictions—broken promises—trauma. This story this morning is a particularly salacious example, but even boring families while they are working to pass on the promise to the next generation, somehow also manage to pass on the trauma.

I spent Friday and Saturday with my extended family up in Rhode Island. It was a family reunion of sorts. We were in from Mexico, California, New York, and New Jersey. The event that brought us all together this weekend is that tomorrow morning my aunt and uncle’s house—their home of more than four decades, the childhood home of my two cousins—is going on the market. My aunt and uncle both recently died within a year of one another, which came as a shock to us all. And so it’s time to clean out the house and say goodbye and spend some time together as a family.

The clean-out resulted in the kitchen table of my dad’s house being covered in old photos and memorabilia. And to sort through it all we needed to pull out all of the photos and memorabilia from my mom’s side of the family which we organized after she died. So, there are photos and documents and letters and childhood drawings and baby shoes in piles on the table going back for more than a century. And Romey and Felix (my two boys) are running around the table trying to grab things off it with their grubby little hands because they know that there’s a treasure up there that they can’t quite understand yet—a record of their family: a triumph of promise.

A few highlights:

A newspaper article from a Boston paper titled “Wedded on Shipboard after 3,000-Mile Trip” telling the story of my great-grandparents’ immigration and wedding.

A love letter from my grandfather to my grandmother that he wrote to her from the Pacific on a Thanksgiving Day near the end of WWII. His perfect penmanship on unlined paper that doesn’t give

out for the entire six pages. He tells her he didn't get any turkey in the mess that day, but then he goes into a story about spending the day on the beach. He'd never seen bigger waves than on that day. And he describes with the eye and the pen of a poet the beauty of the water, of the coral, of the warships sailing past, of watching his friends get pounded by the surf while he sits on the rocks wearing all their wristwatches. He tells her he has so much to be thankful for. He's thankful the war is over, and he'll be coming home soon. He's thankful he survived it. And his brother survived it. He's thankful that a girl like her loves him, and he's thankful for the baby she's carrying after his visit home on leave, and he's thankful for the family they'll be once he's back home with her.

And, of course, all the baby pictures. We have baby pictures going back four generations. And it's wild to look at a baby picture more than a century old and to see a resemblance to the baby sitting on your lap trying to put that priceless old photo in his mouth.

But these triumphs of our family aren't the whole story, are they? No, of course not. I have the best family. The best family! I really do. I'm very lucky. But even my blessed and healthy family has its trauma. And that story is laid out on the table as well.

My great grandparents who got married onboard that ship? Well, there are stories and pictures of my great-grandmother all over the table but about the only one of my great grandfather is that photo from the Boston paper. We think he was bipolar. And in the days before any kind of medicine was available, he was locked away in an institution where he died. And the shame and the poverty and the loneliness and pain my grandmother and her brothers and sisters experienced were a trauma that continues to influence our family in subtle ways.

And that love letter from my poetic grandfather to my grandmother? In photos of him as a young family man, he always looks like the king of the world. He wears his hat rakishly, he cocks his head, he loves his pipe. But in the pictures of my grandfather in my childhood (as I knew him) there is a vacant look in his eye. He died very young from Alzheimer's—a trauma which has literally been passed down through generations in my family. We lost my aunt exactly the same way we lost her father. We see it in great uncles and aunts, and in cousins and second cousins too. And as we sit around the table, we know it will probably go that way for some of us. It may go that way for our kids. It may go that way for theirs. A genetic trauma, literally passed down from generation to generation.

And those baby pictures? My cousin Mike has hundreds of pictures in the pile. So does my cousin Pam. So do I. So does my sister, Christina. But there's not one baby picture of my older brother Josh in this vast pile. Not one. Because my mother got pregnant out of wedlock. The father of her child was black and so her son would be black. She was sent away to a Catholic home for embarrassed young women who were hidden away until they gave birth, and then their children were taken away from them and put into foster homes and Catholic orphanages and hopefully adopted. It was a lifechanging, even life-defining pain and trauma for my mom and for my brother. And it was a secret so big that it

leaked toxically into my relationship and my sister's relationship with my mom before we ever even knew about Josh.

And, of course, there's more in that pile of memories than this. More triumph. And more trauma. And that, I think, is every family. Even God's chosen family experiences trauma and brokenness. Jacob tricks his older brother out of his birthright and his blessing. Then Jacob gets tricked by getting an older sister when he thought he was getting the younger sister. This creates not just a love triangle, but the dreaded love pentagon because there are also two handmaid slaves who Jacob is sleeping with and having children with. Unsurprisingly, the 12 sons from this pentagonal family will not all get along. And the older brothers will plot to kill one of the youngest brothers. They don't kill him, but they do sell him into slavery in Egypt. And this act leads the descendants of all 12 brothers to be enslaved in Egypt. You see? Trauma really is generational. It gets passed on. We often think, "I'll never be like my mom or dad," and then we realize that we have unintentionally recreated in our lives so many of the traumatic patterns and decisions that we were trying to escape from!

Yet God uses our families, with all their imperfections, to fulfill promises. God can help us redeem our stories of trauma into testimonies of hope. Yes, my great-grandfather died in an asylum. And my sister cofounded an organization that fights against inhumane immigration detention policies, and fights for immigrants who die in detention. My grandfather and many others in my family have been lost way too young to the terrible disease of Alzheimer's. And one of my cousins studied neurobiology in order to understand and to help treat the disease. And there is not one baby picture of my brother Josh, but there are hundreds of baby pictures of his daughter, Frana, because he and Mom found one another and reunited despite the obstacles.

We can't erase the pain of past generations, but we can choose to break destructive cycles in our families. Part of the promise of a family is the call to heal one another. May we have faith to embrace the complicated and sometimes deeply traumatic stories of our families. May we have faith to heal and to be healed. If we can do that, then the promise of our families can always be victorious over the trauma of our families. Trauma leaves its mark on every family; God's grace rewrites the story into one of hope and promise.