

SERMON TITLE: "Give Thanks for Family"
SERMON TEXT: Genesis 45:1-15
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: November 13, 2022, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

At this time of year, it's natural for most Americans to be talking with our families about Thanksgiving plans. Who's going to host the big dinner? Who will be traveling from far away? Who has to negotiate around a work schedule or eating with the in-laws? Who will bring the traditional favorite foods, and who will bring a new friend, a new fiancé, or a new baby? Even those of us who won't be getting together with blood relatives may be planning a for a Thanksgiving meal with friends who are like family or who will substitute for family. Maybe we will enjoy the company of some of our church family. Even those of us who might spend the holiday alone probably will be thinking about family, missing those who have passed away, and maybe reaching out by phone, Skype, or Zoom, to those who are distant in miles but near and dear in heart.

During this month of November, we're talking about giving thanks. Last Sunday, we talked about giving thanks for Jesus. Today, as we anticipate our holiday gatherings, I'd like us to look at the story in Genesis 45 and consider some ways we can give thanks for family.

1—THE BIBLICAL STORY

Some of you know well the backstory of Joseph and his family. Maybe the hymn we just sang helped you remember that ancient biblical account. But if you need a little more assistance, let's review what was happening. Joseph was the 11th of the 12 sons of Jacob. It was a big and complex Jewish family, not unlike some large families that have lived here in Utah. Father Jacob's children were born from four different women, so the first 10 sons were half-brothers to Joseph. Joseph's mother Rachel died while giving birth to Joseph's younger brother Benjamin, leaving those two youngest boys to be raised, more than likely, by Rachel's servant Bilhah.

Maybe because Joseph and Benjamin's mother had died and they needed extra attention, maybe because their mother Rachel had been Jacob's first love, maybe because father Jacob had grown older and now had different interests and time, maybe for other reasons we can barely imagine—Jacob appeared to love his two youngest sons the most. Genesis 37 tells us that Joseph might have become spoiled by that special relationship he had with his father. When Joseph was 17 years old, his dad gave him a new robe that may have had many colors or may have had special sleeves. The Hebrew translation is uncertain. But whatever made the robe unique, Joseph's older brothers were quite jealous. Joseph didn't improve his brotherly relationships when he started telling them about his dreams that he, the younger one, would someday be ruling over them.

Because Joseph made his older brothers so angry, they conspired at first to kill him. But then they decided, instead, to sell him to some slave traders who took him to Egypt. Fortunately, Joseph was purchased by an officer in Pharaoh's army who treated him well, and Joseph proved himself to be an able manager of his master's household and property. Unfortunately, his master's wife falsely accused Joseph, and he was thrown in prison. Joseph languished in jail for quite a while, but eventually he was able to impress the Pharaoh with his uncanny ability to interpret dreams. Genesis chapter 41 tells us that Joseph was 30 years old when Pharaoh appointed him to a position that would be something like Secretary of Land Management and Agriculture. For the next seven years, Joseph supervised Egyptian land and crops and stockpiled food in preparation for the famine that Joseph predicted was coming.

When that seven-year famine did come, Joseph had well prepared the Egyptian country. While other nations in the region had no food, Egypt's storehouses were full of grain. That's why, in today's reading from Genesis 45, we find Joseph's brothers there in his presence. After 20-some years apart, the extreme regional famine and Joseph's careful preparations in Egypt had brought them together. A contentious clan that been torn apart by favoritism, selfish pride, jealousy, and harmful actions was now—after all those years—facing a new opportunity to give thanks for family.

2—APPLICATION TODAY

With that biblical story in mind, I invite you to consider some ways that we can give thanks to God for family today.

The **first** of these is the most obvious. Like Joseph and his brothers, we can give thanks to God for family **by participating in reunion**. Reunion opportunities come in many shapes and sizes. Families gather together for weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays. Families often show up when one of their own is playing in a sporting event or performing in a musical concert or a theatrical production. Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, family vacations, and other holidays give us wonderful opportunities to come together and thank God for our parents, grandparents, children, grandchildren, siblings, aunts, uncles, and cousins.

Family reunions sometimes happen because of sad situations. While we would rarely be glad for sickness or death, those times when we gather around a hospital bed or a casket often give us wonderful opportunities to recognize and express our gratitude to God for family. One of the great beauties of funerals and memorial services is that they reunite people who might not otherwise make the effort or spend the money to be in the same place at the same time. As a pastor, I have often seen family members greatly enriched by the sharing of stories and laughter, as well as tears, as they remember a loved one. By participating in those sacred occasions that help to heal the pain of grief—by participating in a reunion—we gain opportunity to give thanks for family.

A **second** way that we can thank God for family is **by offering forgiveness**. Genesis chapters 42-44 tell us that, when Joseph's brothers first came before him seeking help, they didn't recognize who he was. At least 20 years had passed, and they had no expectation that their younger brother was even still alive, let alone that he had become a powerful Egyptian official. Joseph recognized his older brothers, however, and he had to decide what to do. After all that time, Joseph could have just claimed his

identity with the Egyptians, and he could have sent away those Hebrew beggars as unrelated to him. In fact, with his great power, Joseph probably could have had them punished or even killed.

Fortunately, however, Joseph showed us a better way. He didn't get stuck on the fact that his brothers had wanted to kill him, had sold him as a slave, and, in a sense, had caused him to spend time in jail. Instead, in great mercy, Joseph claimed that his brothers had done him no harm. He insisted that God had brought him to Egypt for the positive purpose of helping them survive the famine. Rather than harboring anger and hatred, Joseph offered forgiveness to his brothers—and caused all of them to be grateful for their family.

The same is true for us today. If we hold onto old grudges, we won't find much in our families to be glad about. If we continue blaming our siblings or our parents for our miseries, we won't be able to enjoy their company. How much better it is to think about the good that has happened instead of focusing on the bad. If we can grow up and admit that we have never been perfect family members either, and if we can let bygones be bygones—then we'll have a better chance of coming up with some mercy. When we find forgiveness in our hearts, that's when we'll be able to give thanks for family.

A **third** way to give thanks for family is **by giving needed space** for ourselves and each other. In some ways, this may seem like the opposite of what I said earlier. How can you give space *and* reunite? How can you separate yourselves from one another *and* forgive? Well, in fact, sometimes we have to do one before we can do the other. Sometimes, like in this story of Joseph, we have to put some distance between us and our families. We need time to grow up, time to experience and learn, time to heal, time to develop some positive strengths, time to remember, and time to find peace in God. Once we're stronger and healthier ourselves, then we're more able to forgive. When we've had the time apart that we require, then our reunions often go much better. I'm sure you've heard the saying that "fences make good neighbors." In most cases, we don't want iron curtain walls that have to be torn down, but

some appropriate emotional boundaries are essential in even the best families. By giving needed space for ourselves and our relatives, we will be able to give thanks for our family.

This story from Genesis 45 gives us a **fourth** important piece of advice. We can give thanks for family **by providing support**. Joseph was very fortunate to be able to provide food, an essential material gift, to his brothers and his father. In a basic family unit, such necessities of life are usually shared with spouses and children. In economic hard times, other family members might be in financial need, as well. Whenever we're in a position where we can provide some of that support, such acts of generosity are wonderful signs of the thanks we give to God for our families.

Of course, not all of us have a lot of monetary resources that we can or should give away. But we all have some kind of support we can offer. We can encourage, pray, and listen. We can share our feelings and our interests. We can be patient. We can assist with a chore or a project. We can be a companion. We can call, email, or text message. We can communicate through Facebook or snail mail. We can accept and not judge. We can teach a skill. We can appreciate. In so many ways, we have the capacity to help our family members. And whenever we invest a little time and interest in providing support to our brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, parents and grandparents, children and grandchildren, aunts, uncles, and cousins, that will be an expression of our gratitude for what our family members have done for us. We give thanks for family by providing support.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this sermon I've talked about family, which is something we have all had, or we wouldn't be alive today. But sometimes we aren't surrounded by biological family. Sometimes the family we have is made up of the people we choose. Whether your family is genetically-related, comes from this congregational family, or is made up of other close friends, I hope you will consider these ways of expressing your gratitude. By participating in reunion, by offering forgiveness, by giving needed space, and by providing support, we are able to give thanks for family.

