

Family Values – ON FIRE¹
Genesis 49:22-26, 14-15, 2 Timothy 1:3-7
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
July 15, 2007
Pastor Dave Carver

Playing favorites. Boy, can that tear apart a family.

My mother was one of five children. I didn't meet my mother until she was about 30 years old, but even when I was small and she was all grown, it was easy to see how her family had been ransacked by the demon of favoritism.

I loved my grandfather. He was a great guy. I was always happy to see him. The thing is, though, I was never ever sure about the other side of that equation. One of the flaws that my grandfather had was that he chose favorites. At any given time, one of his children was on top. One of the grandchildren was on top. And if you were on top, life was sweet. But if you weren't there, then you were always looking at him, and wondering, "Who's he favoring now? How do I get on Grandpa's good side?" And maybe even, "What can I do to knock someone else down so I look a little better?" I loved trips to Grandma & Grandpa's hometown of Dansville, New York – but there was always a lot of guesswork involved. Because somehow, "favoritism" had become a "family value".

For Jacob's family, however, there was no guesswork. Twelve sons, one daughter, but so far as Jacob was concerned, the sun rose and set on son #11, Joseph. For his entire life, Joseph was extolled, held up, coddled, loved more than the others. Even when the old man is on his deathbed, he doesn't stop reminding the world that Joseph is the one he loves most. The family is gathered around the bedside, and most of the brothers get a verse, or two. Joseph, however, gets 5 verses of blessing. Flowery talk about Joseph being fruitful and growing, strong speech about Joseph being manly and valiant, hopeful talk about Joseph receiving the blessings from God. You can just about hear the other brothers gagging...but the old man is just pouring it on...Joseph, Joseph, Joseph...

Jacob turns to Issachar, Joseph's older brother, and he's got a few words for him, too. Amanda shared that with you in the New Century Version. That's because I didn't want her to read how your pew Bibles refer to this unloved son of Jacob: Issachar is a dumb ass. A beast of burden. No ambition. He'll end up in a dead-end job, working for someone else. Jacob never really had high hopes for Issachar. The name itself means "hireling". A slave. The paid help.

Gee, thanks, Dad. This kind of love is making me tear up.

¹ The concept for this message, and much of the content, is based on thoughts expressed in Bob Lupton's *Urban Perspectives* Newsletter (April 2007).

Do you know Issachar? Do you know someone who is belittled or betrayed or abandoned by his father? Someone who is taken for granted or taken advantage of by his brothers? Someone who every day of his life is reminded that he's nothing but a horse's rear end, stupid, and lazy, who will never amount to anything? Do you know someone like that?

Sure you do. The world is full of them. Crafton Heights is full of them.

What do you do when you see a situation like that? What do you do when you find yourself in a situation like that?

Aw, geez, Pastor Dave...there's not much to do. That's a huge problem, right there. Not much hope for a kid like that.

Nope, there isn't. I mean, who could imagine Issachar amounting to anything, given the kind of upbringing he had?

But check this out: Issachar didn't end up the way that everyone thought he would. He got married. He had a family. And somehow, he raised his family to see things a little differently. The "sons of Issachar", in fact, developed a reputation for being stand-up people. In Deuteronomy, Moses is getting ready to send the children of Israel into the promised land. As they go, he offers blessings on each of the families. And when he gets to Issachar's family, Moses says, "and you, Issachar, in your tents... will summon peoples to the mountain and there offer sacrifices of righteousness..." (Deut. 33:18-19). And a few generations later, young David has heard the call of God to assume the leadership of the nation, but he's not exactly sure how things will work out. He calls for help, and who is there to help him guide God's people? 1 Chronicles 12:32 says that the men of Issachar "understood the times and knew what Israel should do".

What happened? How did we get from Jacob's perception of his son to a community wherein God's guidance is valued and sought and shared? What happened to Issachar?

I think the better question is "Who happened?"

Someone intervened in Issachar's life. Someone challenged Issachar to grow past his father's understanding of him. Someone encouraged Issachar to seek his own future, rather than simply living into the dismal expectations that others had handed over to him. Someone taught Issachar to think for himself. To connect with other people. Maybe it was someone who showed him how to fish, or to grow crops, or to participate in discussions with the town's elders. Someone helped Issachar to achieve greatness, and to expect it of his own children. All of them.

Issachar's name comes from the Hebrew word "Sakar". It means "hireling" or "servant". It could, however, also mean "reward." With Issachar, it could have gone either way...end up as a slave, a dead-end, a donkey...or be a

reward to someone. You saw how it went for Issachar and his family. I don't know who it was, but someone showed up in his life, and changed the world.

The New Testament passage is a little bit different. We see a similar situation, perhaps. In some ways, Timothy is the same kid on a different day. He's the product of a mixed marriage. Is he Greek? Or Jewish? Does he have his father's name? His mother's culture? He's a young man, but he's surrounded by women. How does Timothy grow into the man he's supposed to be?

Here comes Paul, the one who somehow reached Timothy. He called out to him, asked him to come along on some mission trips, and gave him some training and some responsibility. Before you know it, Timothy is a leader in the church. He's a blessing to others. Someone saw his potential, tapped it, and touched him. And he changed the world.

In the last election – and in the next one – we hear a lot about “Family Values”. I think that when our politicians say that, they're talking about issues surrounding the definition of marriage and childrearing. What are the “family values” of the Bible? Well, you could take a look at the Scripture and say, “From what I can see, the family values here are favoritism and rivalry and envy and apathy and bitterness. And you might not be wrong – those characteristics do describe a great many families in the Bible.

But, thanks be to God, for us the family is more than the sum of its parts. Each one of us has a particular story, and each one of us comes from a specific family, but we are trusting that God is molding us into something even better than we could be on our own. Each of us is called to look at the story we've lived so far and turn that story in a God-ward direction so that those around us might be strengthened or encouraged.

Paul writes to Timothy that he is to “rekindle” the gifts that are within him. You know what “kindle” means, right? To set something on fire, or to make it glow. Another way to say it is to “fan the flames”. Take the small thing in your life and nurture it and work on it and blow on it and feed it ... Use your story to ignite someone else. Take what God has given to you and what your family has done to you and use it to bless your neighbor.

Today, we want to honor Khadija, Tim, and Jim, and to say “thanks be to God” for the gifts that have been poured out into this community through you. Between the three of you, there's not much this church that doesn't have the fingerprints from one of the three of you on it. You've blessed our attempts to structure our ministry, to reach into people's lives with Good News, to facilitate worship that is powerful and vibrant, to engage in relationships that are fruitful and affirming. Thank you, thank you, thank you, to Jim and Tim and Khadija. Believe me when I say that we will miss you – in many ways. You have, in your own ways, looked for men and women like Issachar and kids like Timothy. And we who remain will see the fruits of your ministry in the years to come.

The challenge remains, my friends, for the people in this room who are NOT moving to New York, or Ohio, or Washington. In what ways will we seek to mold the hearts and minds of our neighbors – many of whom have “learned” some terrible things about themselves? Where will we find those who have been taught to see themselves as “hirelings” and encourage them to see themselves as “rewards” or blessings? No one could blame you if you gave up. What do you expect? I mean, really, there is no reason to hope here...unless..unless there is an Issachar laying around. Unless there is a Timothy waiting to be discovered.

May God bless the three of you for the gifts you have shared with us. And may God bless you who stay as you continue to ignite the lives of the men and women and boys and girls about whom God is simply crazy. Amen.