

Sermon Text for January 20, 2019

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Genesis 45:1-9, Acts 7:9-16

“Let me tell you about my father”

Yesterday was one of those days that become the highlight of the year, and that is pretty good because we are only in January. We had our annual Officer’s Retreat, and this year we invited Elders, Trustees, and Deacons to be present and we had a group of over 40. One of the most insightful times of that retreat is the examination of the incoming officers where they let us know what has motivated them to become an officer at this time, apart from the fact that someone asked them. You hear the whole variety of life stories, but there is always one common thread. In the midst of whatever my life was like, I still felt like God was leading me to this place, to this church, to this time in my life where I needed to serve this church in this capacity.

Congregation, I need to tell you that the expression that when I stepped into this church I felt hugged, was heard a few times. Also, Clayton Frackman’s name came up a number of times, and sometimes in a positive manner. But each life story brought that person to that room to say: Here I am Lord, send me.

Romans tells us that all things work for good for those who trust in the Lord. Part of what we learn as people of faith in life is that in the midst of life there is a promise and a hope that God is behind it all working and making things work as Romans tells us. There is no stronger example of this in Scripture than the story of Joseph. Stephen in Acts retells the Joseph story as a way to defend his faith before a hostile crowd. What a way for him to say: Let me tell you about my father and why I am the way that I am and why I do the things that I do.

READ SCRIPTURE

As I was preparing this week for this sermon and thinking about Stephen and his portrayal of Joseph and how important it was to the people who were listening to him to identify with a patriarch who set the stage for everyone in that room, I was also feeling a little bit guilty knowing that when I preach this sermon in about 12 hours while you are shivering in single digits I will be on a plane to Puerto Rico to play golf. So I was feeling bad and guilty and then a sudden thought came upon me that I really am a son of my father in so many ways, and yet on a much lower plane. So much of who I am is a direct result of who my father was.

I have a passion for Jesus Christ and for all of God's people. I played basketball in college and he played pro-ball in Portugal. He knew on a first name basis heads of state and civil rights leaders, I know Clayton Frackman. But this sermon, in spite of its title is not my attempt to put a biography or a eulogy together for a man who meant so much more to me and shaped me even more than I ever imagined, my father, but rather a recognition that we are inextricably shaped and molded by our fathers and mothers, and I am going to lay out for you that the greatest shaper of who we are and who we become is our heavenly Father.

Let's look at the Joseph story in the Bible. Joseph is the youngest son and the most favored son as most of us youngest children are. Can I hear an amen to that. If you don't believe me then look at Genesis 37:3 and it says right there. His father doted over him, made a special coat for him, made the others work with the sheep while Joseph stayed home. We can start by saying that Joseph's relationship with his father was crucial to who he was and what eventually he became.

His father, Jacob whose name eventually changes to Israel because he is the father of the people of God, loved God so much that his entire life was devoted to his service. That rubbed off on Joseph. The moment we find in our reading for today that his brothers come to understand who Joseph really is his first question to them after decades of estrangement is: so how's dad? Chalk one up for the guys on this one. Not how's my mom, my best friend, my dog, the neighborhood. How's dad, I really miss him. 3 times in these verses in Genesis he asks about his dad. You know why?

Because it was his father's insistence on faith that allowed Joseph to get through some really tough times. When he was sold into slavery he didn't give up but when doubts crept in he would say: let me tell you about my father. When Potiphar's wife tried to seduce him and he was put in jail, it wasn't the end of the story because he could remind himself by saying, let me tell you about my father. When the baker forgot about him he didn't lose hope because he could remember about the lessons his father gave him on the constancy of God. How's my father. How is the one who doesn't even realize it but kept me alive during this whole time. He learned through his father that no matter what happens, God is making something good come out of it. Is everything that happens in our life good. No, absolutely not. But God continues to work in all situations so good came eventually arise.

Stephen in Acts takes the same approach. Instead of referring back to his father as the shaper of his faith he talks about our ancestors. Here we find ourselves in a church that has a 186 year history and so those who went before us in this church in a large part make us who we are as a church today.

Stephen, like Joseph is facing an almost certain death with people falsely accusing him of all sorts of heresy and blasphemy and do you know how he responds to the question that they give him to start our verses off, is all that they say true? He says to them, let me tell you first about my father, my ancestors, those who went before me and whose faith helped shape and mold my faith. He then proceeds to go over the entire Old Testament to how God has intervened in every single situation where humanity was given an opportunity and failed and yet God continues to draw us out and give us a second chance.

Adam and Eve ate the apple, well, let me tell you about my father. Abraham and Sara laughed at God, but our God has a sense of humor, let me tell you about my father. Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery but you can't chain down God's purposes, let me tell you about my father. Moses refused to go down to Egypt so God gave him an offer he couldn't refuse, let me tell you about my father. Stephen says if you want to know who I am and what I am made of then let me tell you about my father because my father in heaven has shaped me, given me a second chance, shown me life in his Son Jesus Christ. So if you are asking me, Stephen says, if it is true that I am in love with my father then yes, I am.

What situations are you facing that maybe your own inside devils are tormenting you and are asking you is it really true all that they say about your father. When the debts are piling up do you have the experiences and the strength to say, let me tell you about my father. When the relationship is heading south and you just don't know where to find the answers, look up and say father, I need to hear from you so I can tell others about you.

I've learned a lot about life from so many different people in my life, but one event stands out pretty starkly with the many others. When I was a pastor in Florida I led a delegation to Russia, to Siberia to our sister city called Palatka, Russia. In that city was our sister church and the pastor was Father Sergei, the pastor at the Orthodox Church of the Transfiguration in Palatka. He came into the room where I was staying and said: I have something for you. You need to know something about his young man. He was a

former captain in the KGB, his grandparents served in the work camps and suffered terribly. Palatka itself is a town that is on the verge of falling apart with the young people and all people leaving in droves.

He reached into his pocket and gave me, he gave me a cross and said this is called a kritchnik, it is a cross that needs to stay against your skin to remind you that God is with you at all times no matter what is happening in your life. He was telling me that, someone who had seen more in life than I would ever want to see and has suffered more than I could ever imagine. Let me tell you about my father.

One of my most vivid memories, good memories, of my dad is walking in the fog in Portugal and he holding my hand and leading me through a path that I could not see but knowing that I was safe because I could feel that hand guide me. Stephen felt so confident in his father's presence and guidance that even as he faced certain death, he knew it was going to work out. He trusted the words that we hear earlier in Romans today that all things will work for good for those who trust in him.

Where are you right now? Are you in need of a bear hug from God. Are you in need of someone's hand to guide you through the fog of life that you are facing. Well let me tell you about my father. He is there waiting for you. Some of us may not have had the best father and this example chills you to the bone.

The father that I am telling you about today is an eternal heavenly father who sees your broken relationships and heals them. He sees the fear of the future that you have and he accompanies you every step of the way. The father I am telling you about is waiting for you to reach out to him with the confidence of Stephen while the world is swirling around you and be able to rely upon him for all things.

Amen.