

“Family Stories”
by Micah Tillman
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Based on the following passages: Genesis 24:45–67; Psalm 45:10–16
Romans 7:15–25; Matthew 11:16–30

Jesus’ brother James warns, “Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers and sisters, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness” (James 3:1, NRSV). And Jesus himself said, “If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea” (Matthew 18:6, NRSV).

So, for my personal safety, I’d like to ask you to take what I’m about to say with a grain of salt. It’s going to be an experiment, and I’m not sure if it’s going to work. But the subject is important and I really think I should try.

We heard the two Old Testament passages from today’s lectionary readings just a minute ago. And in a few minutes, I’m going to ask Wendel and Cheryl to come back up to read the two New Testament passages. I want us to hear all four of today’s readings, because each is fascinatingly strange. But perhaps their strangeness shouldn’t surprise us. Family stories have a tendency to be strange, and I would like to suggest that these are *our* family stories.

Every family has stories. What I mean is there are certain stories for each family that, as it were, shape the family, and make them who they are. Telling and hearing these stories is the family’s way of reliving—and sharing the reliving of—formative events in their own, and their predecessors’, lives. New members are inducted into the family by being told the stories, and thus sharing in the events the communal living of which helps to hold the family together across

the generations. In telling and listening to the family's stories, the family members—new and old—encounter and make contact with the people and places they are all coming from.

When you marry into a family, or are born into a family, or are adopted into a family, or simply latch onto a family, one of your central duties is to learn the family's stories. Until you know their stories, you won't really feel like a part of the family. In fact, I'd be willing to bet that until you can tell the family's stories as if they were your own, you'll still feel, to some extent, like an outsider.

Of course, some family stories you don't tell. There are some things that each family, as a family, simply doesn't talk about. Those stories don't get told around the table. They get whispered, person-to-person, and only when absolutely necessary. It's the shared refusal to "go there," the united avoidance of "saying that," that is these stories' contribution to familial cohesion. So, it's not only in being able to join with everyone else in telling and hearing the right stories, but also in being able to join with everyone else in knowingly avoiding the wrong stories—in steering conversations away from sensitive areas—that you come to feel like a part of the family.

Now, take the passage from Genesis 24 that we just heard. This is clearly a family story for the Jewish people who first told it. Abraham was their first patriarch, and this is the story about how he managed to find a wife for his only—in their eyes—legitimate heir, right before he died. It is a story about the bravery of the servant who actually did the finding, both in travelling the long journey back to their original home, and in having the nerve to tell God what to do. It is a story about how God saw to it that the family continued, by pointing out the right woman to the servant. It is a story about the matriarch Rebekah's sacrificial willingness to leave her family and country, to join her great-uncle Abraham's family in a foreign country, and to ensure the

continuance of their branch of the family. If it wasn't for her decision—and ultimately, God's guidance—the Jewish people who first told the story knew that they wouldn't be there. It is the kind of story you tell with gratitude and a touch of awe.

If you read the full passage, you see that the story is, in large part, about people telling the story to other people. And it's the kind of story that people would tell. It's the kind of story that would have spread like wildfire through Abraham's enormous household when the servant returned with Rebekah. It's the kind of story that Isaac and Rebekah would have told Jacob and Esau, and that Jacob and Esau would have told their children. And it's the kind of story the family, as they grew more and more numerous over the centuries, would have hung onto.

Each generation would tell the next about Abraham, about the servant's bravery, about Rebekah's bravery, about God's continual commitment to fulfilling the promise to make Abraham the father of many nations and a blessing to the entire world. At some point, a guy name Moses would appear in the family, who had a talent for organization and leadership, and a penchant for teaching and getting stuff written down. He would make sure the story ends up where we have it now, in the middle of the book we call *Genesis*.

Later, when the family has become a full-blown country, complete with a central government and kings and all that, stories of the monarchs' marriages would be told. In Psalm 45, we have one such story, in the form of a song. The soon-to-be queen is encouraged to leave her family, and make a new family with the king. The onlookers are told of the soon-to-be queen's beauty and happiness. The king is promised great children, in a manner reminiscent—though perhaps ominously so—of God's promise to Abraham.

Like Rebekah, this soon-to-be queen is led to her future husband by someone else. Unlike Rebekah, however, she does not seem to have any say in the matter. She is led with “joy and

gladness,” but it’s impossible to tell in the English translation whether she is the one who is happy. And unlike Rebekah, she is not promised children; the children promised will be the king’s.

Now, there are a lot of family stories between Genesis 24 and Psalm 54, and there are many others between Psalms and the New Testament. But let’s jump ahead, and have Cheryl and Wendel read for us the lectionary’s two New Testament readings for today.

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The first passage we just heard was from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome. That letter is all about the question of whether the members of that church were going to be a family or split in two along the lines of ethnicity and heritage. Paul is trying desperately to convince the Roman Christians, both Jew and Gentile, that they *are* one family—the Gentiles have been grafted into the tree—and should start living like it.

The problem is that the most important family stories—the ones you find in Genesis in particular, and “The Law” in general—seem to belong to the Jewish members of the church alone, and it’s not exactly clear how the Gentiles are supposed to adopt them as their own. In the middle of trying to explain it, Paul has the little almost-breakdown we just heard. It’s even more heart-rending when you read the whole thing. Paul is so passionate about what he’s trying to teach his distant flock that he ends up talking in circles and resorting to painful hyperbole. And it’s not really clear that he’s made any progress by the end of the passage.

Now, Paul is, as it were telling a story about himself. But the sayings of important family members come to function like family stories, and that’s usually what we have with Paul’s epistles. And like 2 Peter 3:16, says, Paul’s family sayings can be “hard to understand” (NRSV).

But Paul had a pastor's heart, and we can forgive him for maybe not always being clear in his urgent attempts to keep the expanding family from descending into chaos.

The expansion of the family to include Gentiles, as well as Jews, happened because of a whole new set of family stories about Jesus. In the lectionary passage from Matthew, we heard a couple of the "family sayings"-type stories. In the first one, Jesus says there is just no pleasing people these days. You do one thing, and they accuse you of being possessed. You do the opposite, and they accuse you of being a drunk collaborator. And yet, Jesus says, if you join his team—and the metaphorical team he has in mind is a team of oxen—your life will be pretty good. Joining Jesus' family is, he thinks, something worth doing.

One interesting thing is that Jewish people could identify their family by different members at different times. They could think of themselves as the children of Abraham, but also as the children of Jacob (i.e., Israel), as the followers of Moses, and the people of David. Then, along comes a new branch of the family claiming that the family really should be identified in terms of a new guy named Jesus. They say he's the guy all the prophets in the family have been talking about. They say he was kind of the mission of the family in the first place.

In another twenty years or so it will have been two-thousand years since members of the Jewish family started making such claims. To this day, we struggle with the question of what it means for us to belong to a family that is simultaneously the family of Jesus and the family of Moses. We worry about how the stories that only the Christian branch of the family tell relate to the stories told by the whole family.

But one thing we all agree on is that our family stories are different in one important respect from a normal family's stories. When we hear them or tell them, we have a nagging sense that there are supposed to be two people talking. Our family have always taken God to be

speaking through these stories—or at least trying to teach us something through them—even if God didn't personally write them. We're not always sure what this means, or how it works, or whether it works, but that's how the stories have come down to us.

The thing is that even when we can't quite figure out what to do with these stories, we can't really escape them. And there are two reasons for this. First, you can't have a family without its stories, so we bought them, as it were, when we bought into the family. Even if some of them are the kind to be whispered out of earshot of the children, and only when absolutely necessary, they're still a part of where we're coming from in this family.

Second, we can't escape the stories in the Bible because being a part of this branch of the family means imitating its greatest member. And that guy knew the stories backwards and forwards, and seemed to take them pretty seriously. By the time he was twelve, he could hold his own with his people's story experts (Luke 2:46–47). When he was in an argument he could quote just the right family saying or story at just the right time (e.g., Matthew 12:3–7, 38–42, 15:1–9, 19:1–9, 21:12–16, 22:23–32, 34–46; Luke 4:1–12). And he cited the family stories and sayings all the time in his teaching (e.g., Matthew 5:17–48, 7:12, 11:10, 21–24, 13:13–17, 19:16–19, 21:42, 23:29–36, 24:15, 26:54, 27:46; Luke 24:25–27).

In other words, to be a member of this branch of the family is to be a follower of Christ. And to be a follower of Christ is to be an imitator of Christ. And to be an imitator of Christ is not only to obey him, nor simply to reincarnate his actions. Following Christ *the leader* inherently involves imitating Christ *the teacher* (who appeals to the family stories), and Christ *the student* (of the family stories).

So, this is my experimental interpretation. What if the Bible is the written collection of our family stories—stories that our family have always taken God to be speaking through, even

though we're the ones doing the talking—and what if we are always coming from these stories, whether we like them or not? What if we maintain our family cohesion across the past three-thousand-plus years by continually going back to these stories? What if we, in this particular branch of the family, believe that going back to one particular member of the family, and imitating him, is fundamental to being a member of the family? And, what if we can't imitate this particular member of the family without imitating the seriousness with which he treated our family stories?

Could such an interpretation turn out to be true? If it did, I think it would need to answer at least two questions. First, how does what I'm proposing here to a bunch of progressive Mennonites differ from creedal, orthodoxy-centric, fundamentalism? Second, how does what I'm proposing differ from a blind conservatism and traditionalism that makes growth and improvement impossible? [13]

If I understand my own experimental view correctly, it differs from creedal, orthodoxy-centric fundamentalism, in that it would claim we buy into the family *first*, and *then* learn and live with the family stories. It's our commitment to the Body of Christ that leads to our commitment to the stories that shape and unify that body, rather than vice versa. We don't adopt a creed so much as we get ourselves adopted into a family.

Here's what I'm thinking: Our attraction is first to the family around us. Then we discover that what makes them so attractive is that they're imitating a particular member of the family named Jesus. Then we start getting interested in the family stories about this Jesus. And then we start to get interested in how the stories about Jesus fit into—or even are the center of—the family story as a whole. We aren't attracted by disembodied creeds and sets of fundamental

beliefs in the abstract so much as we're attracted by people who, it turns out, are telling and living out certain beliefs and stories.

But how does this differ from blind conservatism and traditionalism, in which improvement and growth are impossible? First, if we ever master the imitation of Christ, we can stop growing and improving. He said, with an air of amused sarcasm. Until then, what it means to be part of this family is to be growing into Christ (Ephesians 4:15).

Second, when you become a part of the family, you become a part of the story, and then the question becomes how you live the story out. The family story isn't finished yet, and it's up to us to write the next chapter. But the chapter we write has to be a continuation of the story, not the beginning of another. The chapter we write has to grow out of the story so far. For the family to improve without breaking at generational boundaries, each improvement has to be *growth*, and genuine growth draws on the resources that the family stories make available to us.¹

¹ For background on this view of how tradition and progress might be compatible, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) and Donald W. Livingston, "David Hume and the Conservative Tradition," *The Intercollegiate Review* 44, no. 2 (fall 2009): 30. I'm not certain that it's correct—I don't think I have enough experience of the world to know for certain—but it is intriguing.