

Brotherly Love?

Texts: Romans 8:1-11, Genesis 25:19-34

Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – July 12, 2020

Rev. Michael F. Atzert

Prior to the stories of the Old Testament being written down, the history of God's chosen people of Israel were passed from one generation to the next orally – through the telling of stories. Families would gather together around a meal – or perhaps around a fire – and the patriarch of the family would tell the rest about their forefathers and foremothers – Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel. Surrounding this personal history was the overwhelming presence and direction of God in all circumstances.

Rick Morley, an Episcopal priest who describes himself on his blog as “follower of Jesus, father of two, husband of one, Episcopal priest, with one book down, one blog up...surrounded by empty jars of Nutella,” writes, “I’ve done a lot of thinking lately about the stories of Genesis and how they found their own origin in oral tradition. These stories were told over campfires, and passed down through the generations from parents to children long, long before they were ever written down. It’s why the stories have so much color to them. Their tragedy is relentlessly tragic. Their comedy is overwhelmingly funny—if we can get past their stilted and stained-glass English translations.

Obviously the cartoonish differences between Esau and Jacob were part of the oral canon that the descendants of Jacob told to laugh at the descendants of Esau, the Edomites. The punch-line is that the great-great-grand-daddy of the Edomites was a hairy, brutish, blue-collar dunce who sold his most valuable possession for a bowl full of bean stew. Or, “red stuff.” You better believe that always got a raucous laugh every time that line was fed out over the crackle of the bonfire.

In the big picture, this is more of a story of two nations and their distaste of the other.

Like a good college basketball rivalry, the legend is bigger and better than the reality. As long as you're on the winning side. My guess is that the Edomites had similar stories that they told around their campfires. Maybe they were about how much of a sissy Jacob was. Regardless, where I identify with this particular story is in how dysfunctional it all is. Sometimes I think we feel like we have to project to the world—and certainly to the neighbors—that our family, our home is “normal.” Everything is alright. It’s fine.

But, this story reminds me that it doesn’t have to be fine. Nothing has to be fine.

Things can be awful and embarrassingly dysfunctional—and God can still move. God can still do great things. I really believe that at the heart of the stories of the patriarchs, and the whole of the history in the book of Genesis, is the truth that God does things through the lives of the strangest and most awkward of people” (From Internet. www.rickmorley.com/archives/489. 07/07/20).

We are back to Biblical family dysfunction again this week in our text from the book of Genesis. And it appears that the apples have not fallen far from the tree, as Jacob and Esau have some struggles in their relationship as brothers. They could not be more different. It was probably difficult to believe that they were even related because of the differences in their looks. And the power struggles and conniving is more than evident.

However, their story begins with prayer. We learn that Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah. Unfortunately, though, as was the case with Isaac’s own mother, there is difficulty in conceiving a child. So, what does Isaac do? He prays. He prays to God that God would grant them a child – that Rebekah would conceive and they would experience the joy and love of being

parents. “The Lord answered his prayer, and his wife Rebekah became pregnant.” It was not an easy pregnancy – twins, and active at that. So, Rebekah prays – inquiring of the Lord.

It is a great reminder for us of the importance of prayer. As parents and grandparents. As children – young while growing up and then older when caring for aging parents. As a church family, praying for one another and supporting one another through our prayers. Prayer is the foundation by which our faith grows and is sustained. It appears that both Isaac and Rebekah know this, and they call on God in their troubles and their lack of understanding of the things of life. God hears and answers. Then and now.

Rebekah gives birth to her twin boys, Esau – the older one, and Jacob – the younger brother. Esau was the outdoorsman, the hunter, and was clearly closer to his father, Isaac. Jacob, on the other hand, appears to be more of the introvert, had a love for the kitchen, and was loved dearly by his mother. So different, even though they were born and raised together. One day, as Esau comes in from the outside, he is hungry, starved. He insists that his younger brother give him some of the stew he is cooking. Is anyone surprised by the response from Jacob? “First sell me your birthright,” Jacob says. For a plate of stew. Something so important and vital for the older brother of the family. The birthright was an identifying factor for the oldest son. Jacob has the audacity to ask for it – and Esau has the shortsightedness to give it away.

As I said a few weeks ago, families are messy. These two brothers could not be more different from one another. The rivalry between the two is strong. We will see that again when Isaac is on his deathbed and Jacob swoops in and gets the blessing meant for the oldest son, Esau. These decisions would cause division and animosity between the brothers for years to come. It would cause fractures that would take years to heal.

In some of our own families, there are divisions and fractures due to rivalry, jealousy, and other petty things. Even in the church, there are issues that divide and separate us to the point of schism. Some of these never heal, and people leave the church because of the hurt they have experienced. How could God heal the two brothers in Genesis? How can God heal the church of today? How can God heal us?

Despite the mess, God works in the midst of these two brothers. Both of them go on to become great nations, because of the work of God. Despite the worst of the two in relationship, God makes things happen out of their worst. Rick Morley writes, “When God looked out over the whole world to find the people he would call his own – the people he would bless with the privilege of being a blessing to the whole world – he chose what often times looks like the ‘b’ team. The replacements. The one who didn’t even have the illusion of having their act together. He chose people – Just. Like. Us. And deep down between all the guffaws and reveries of the campfire, that’s the message that our forbears got night-in and night-out. We don’t have to be perfect and have everything figured out before God can visit us, bless us. In fact, we can be a blessing to the whole world. If God can work in the household of Isaac, Rebekah, Esau and Jacob – my goodness, there is no doubt that God can work in us too” (Internet. 07/07/20).

Despite our mess, God can work in and through us – in our families, in whatever struggles we may have as a church. God can bless the world through each of us – no matter how fragile, broken or flawed we may be. Thanks be to God! Let us pray...

Lord God, we thank You once again for another story of family dysfunction and chaos. We thank You for those Biblical characters with whom we can relate – even in their poor decisions and sin. Help us, we pray, to be rooted in prayer and to trust that You will work, even through our mess. Thank You for Your blessing, even when we are flawed and broken. In Jesus’ name, Amen.