



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 10A, JULY 12, 2020
GENESIS 25:19-34; PSALM 119:105-112; ROMANS 8:1-11; MATTHEW 13:1-9, 18-23

GENERATION TO GENERATION

Genesis 25:19-34 *[These are the descendants of Isaac, Abraham's son: Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean. Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord granted his prayer, and his wife Rebekah conceived. The children struggled together within her; and she said, "If it is to be this way, why do I live?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. And the Lord said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples born of you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, the elder shall serve the younger." When her time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first came out red, all his body like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Afterward his brother came out, with his hand gripping Esau's heel; so he was named Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when she bore them. When the boys grew up, Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the field, while Jacob was a quiet man, living in tents. Isaac loved Esau, because he was fond of game; but Rebekah loved Jacob. Once when Jacob was cooking a stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was famished. Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stuff, for I am famished!" (Therefore he was called Edom.) Jacob said, "First sell me your birthright." Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" Jacob said, "Swear to me first." So he swore to him, and sold his birthright to Jacob. Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank, and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.]*

In the early 1990s, during my three years of family practice residency training, the resident doctors would gather each Friday afternoon for an intensive dive into behavioral science, guided by adjunct faculty—a psychiatrist steeped in Jungian

practice, and a psychologist who specialized in family systems theory. That work, and much more since then, has informed nearly every aspect of my life—personal and professional.

Those Friday sessions usually involved interviewing a patient, carefully selected by the faculty, and then reflect together on the encounter. The purpose was not to train us to be psychologists or psychiatrists, but to see that the persons we would treat as family doctors were not a reductive sum of body parts. Rather, we were to rely on a bio-psycho-social-spiritual model of medicine that seeks to serve humans and their ailments holistically.

The cumulative stress of life as residents did not always comport to the holistic principles upon which family medicine stands or the compassion which it demanded. There were times, sadly, that our discussions after the patient exited turned to judgment for the person's ill-fated decisions, or cynicism for the imperfect health care system which failed them. Sometimes humor was weaponized at a person's expense, rather than being healing balm in the thicket of such pain.

I share all of this for a purpose today, as we wade deeper into the family saga of Genesis week by week, turning today to the sibling rivalry between Jacob and Esau. I am convinced that the deeply seated wisdom of the scriptures is something akin to our modern notion of family systems theory, AND I think that congruence has something to say about what is playing out on the stage

of human experience in this most auspicious moment.

If I were to summarize family systems theory, I would say this: that human beings function in a web of relationships to which we bring our emotional energy, recognized and unrecognized, and that most problems in the human condition are rooted in familial stories that stretch across generations. Left unaddressed, they will propagate into the generations to come.

So the mythic saga of Jacob and Esau shares the tale of two brothers, who not only do not get along but breed the hatred into the generations that follow them—Israelites and Edomites—this even though they are twins. We know that their mother Rebekah played favorites; surely Jacob and Esau knew that as well, which would have made for some painfully challenging relationships between them. Would the boys' relationship have been different had not Rebekah been so manipulative?

We know the boys were born late in Isaac's life—a theme common to biblical stories where God is seen as the agent of holy purpose and possibility. We can imagine the seeds of pent up anxiety and thrilled expectation being sown into the gravid womb of an aging mother, and into the tenuous circumstances of an aging father whose sight

dims to a point he cannot recognize one boy from the other. He longs to bless them, each in their own right, even as his own childhood memory clearly recalls the dagger his own father holds over his head, and would have killed him but for a spare word from God. How must that experience have haunted Isaac for the rest of his life! How could it not inform his own fatherhood?

Abraham's impulse to sacrifice his son, presumably at the direction of God, makes no sense to us. But how many family stories do we know where the father sacrificed his son's right to a good, safe life on the altar of alcohol, or the altar of relentless put-downs, or the altar of unattainable expectations for success? It's no surprise when the son conveys that pain and sorrow to the next generation.

We are told Jacob was a trickster, a man bent on devious means to get ahead. It's bad enough here in the passage today, coaxing his brother's birthright from him for a bowl of pottage. It gets more interesting from here...and more disturbing.

But surely we can say he did not become that man of deceit on his own, in a vacuum. He was formed and influenced by the haunted landscape of his family's saga, generation to generation. All of it, good and bad, sown into the confluence of his life and the expectations he and others have of him. And from there,

Jacob sows the seeds into the next generation that includes twelve sons whose story is as brilliant and terrifying as any we know.

And yet, God still uses them all, broken and imperfect as they are. God uses them for good.

I hope I've whet your appetite to read the story straight through. Genesis beginning in chapter 12. Family Systems writ large and small, for us, as we try to make sense of our lives here and now.

There is truth to be told here, my friends—truth for our time. And, I believe with all my heart, there is an invitation to compassion that lies deep in the soil of this story, ready to bear fruit in our own lives, if we will allow it to germinate in our hearts. For that to happen, we must ask where is God in all of this? How might God use for good that which was meant for evil?

I suppose it is human nature to incline to judgment and cynicism rather than compassion, using a binary system of moral calculus—a person is good or a person is evil. It's a slippery slope that quickly leads us to consider jettisoning a person altogether because of the heinous acts they've committed. Translated: A person who does evil is evil. Do we really believe that though?

Moral judgment serves a purpose, as we differentiate a good act from a bad one, but that is two-dimensional analysis in a three-dimensional world that invites a compassionate eye to strain through the superficial gloss of quick judgment, down into the contoured existence of life seeded in the merciful womb of God's belovedness for all. Is there anyone whom we would say is not our brother, our sister, our sibling in God's family system enthused with redemptive love?

My friends, in recent weeks this nation has embarked on important work of questioning our history as handed down to us, historic traditions often aimed at preserving the myths of supremacy upon which this nation stands so precariously.

In a way, this is family systems work as well, with the seeds of today's woes sown across the generations. This work only makes sense in the bio-psycho-social-spiritual realm of relationality, and we need to rewrite the narrative informed by truth gleaned from multiple perspectives, especially those too long silenced.

To be clear, the confederate monuments erected a century ago as altars to the sacrifice-hungry idols of racial fear and oppression must come down, and we must learn from

those evil impulses, lest we be destined to repeat that sad history.

But let us take great care in our work extrapolated from there, as we rewrite the glorified and unadulterated histories of men and women who have been regarded as heroes of this nation. We can learn the truth of their lives without redacting their lives from our histories altogether. To redact them from our family saga will, I fear, leave us with gaping holes in our collective psyche—holes which we will want to fill with something, anything no matter how destructive it may be. That's how addictions form, and to be sure, nations can have addictions just as individuals do. That could be a whole other sermon—the addictions of America...

Suffice to say here that people have suffered terribly because of the ways we've told our family stories. Secrets are toxic to family systems, and God knows our nation has held its share of secrets, also known as lies. It is time to set that approach aside. It is time to live differently. It is time to heal holistically.

But we must take care not to be diverted by moral shortcuts that recklessly apply the labels of good and evil as summary judgments of people living today or from generations past. If we are honest, we must know that we all have the capacity for good, and we all have the capacity for evil, and even still, we trust that God can use it for good.

Some of our ancestors won't be very likeable. Some of our siblings will do awful things. But

we know they live in a family system that has probably hurt them, too. And with that knowledge maybe we can claim our vocation of compassion, for them and those they hurt, and for us also, even as we work for a better, more whole world as we do. Because, at the end of the day, we all were knit together in the womb of God's tender love and mercy.

As followers of Jesus, here we stand; we can do no other.